

Scepticism in the novels of Dostoyevsky and  
Robbe-Grillet:  
the rejection of Pyrrhonian tranquillity.

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand.

June, 1993

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*La vie est de brûler des questions*  
Antonin Artaud

For my parents.

## Acknowledgments

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I would like to express my thanks to the following:

**The interloan and reference staff of the Otago University Library (especially Liz, Freda, and Greta):** for their assistance in obtaining material from other librarians and for responding patiently to my many queries.

**The Otago French department research assistants, Catriona Bannister and Stephanie Howard:** for their assistance with the bibliography. I am particularly grateful to Stephanie Howard for time spent tracing references when the computer network was not in operation.

**Dr Grant Gillett, Professor Marie Maclean:** for reading and responding helpfully to work that was preparatory to the final thesis (notably, to some of the ideas developed in Chapters 2 and 5).

**The Revs. Robert Yule and Terry Wall:** for sharing their enthusiasm for the theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church, and for introducing me to some helpful reading material.

**Professor Alan Musgrave:** for lending me his copies of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* and *Sextus Empiricus. The Major Writings*, at a crucial stage in proceedings.

**Nola Leov:** for reading the first draft of this thesis and for offering encouragement at a time when it was needed.

**My colleagues in the Otago French department:** for longsuffering. I would like to thank especially my head of department, Dr Elizabeth Goulding, in this regard.

**Dr Anna Smith:** for first pointing me in the direction of M.M Bakhtin, and for providing both encouragement, and extremely stimulating discussion, in matters theoretical.

**Allan Smith:** for first introducing me to Dostoyevsky, and for sharing his insights into Russian literature and making me, as a consequence, a more attentive reader.

**Bryan, Jean and Jennifer Smith, Lydia and Richard Gardiner, Dr Elena Poletti:** for their generous support and encouragement throughout.

**Dr Patricia Duffy:** for innumerable hours spent answering my queries about computerspeak (and sometimes the same queries several times over). Without her patient assistance the formal presentation of this thesis would have been considerably inferior.

**My supervisor, Dr Peter Tremewan, of the University of Canterbury:** for his judicious and patient supervision throughout this project.



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Abstract? I can find no mention of a c  
in the Colloquies (pp. 221-4, 77-8).

# Introduction

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Quand tu regardes avec des jumelles, tu tiens un instrument de précision et tu vois très nette une petite cabane qui serait floue sans jumelles. Aussitôt tu dis: 'Tiens, elle ressemble à telle autre, elles sont à peu près pareilles', déjà tu ne la vois plus, dans ton esprit tu la compares à celle que tu crois être *avant* alors qu'elle est *après*, l'autre cabane. C'est une manie. [...] Le mieux serait de ne jamais comparer. On serait sûr d'aimer comme il faut. Mais peut-être que c'est impossible. Voilà où on en est.

(Robert Pinget)

## i. The point of comparison: Dostoyevsky and "notre modernité bouleversée"

Henry James once wrote of the series of relations an artist creates in his work:

Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall appear to do so.<sup>1</sup>

James's definition of art is not inappropriate for the activity of criticism, especially when the critic is on the threshold of a comparative study for which there is no certain justification, but much hypothesis and speculation, and much, too, that is the product of a "geometry of one's own". Stephen Heath has suggested that continuity is the "backbone of the natural attitude",<sup>2</sup> a warning against projects which rely on undemonstrable assumptions about coherence and universality that writers like Alain Robbe-Grillet, for instance, would contest. But if we accept, with Henry James, that "relations" in literature "stop nowhere" and need not, therefore, be limited to the terms of a single definition or tradition, then the problem of discontinuity Heath emphasizes may be read, not as a deterrent to comparative literature, but as an invitation to broaden and diversify its scope. This study is not an attempt to establish "influence" or "identity" so much as a following through of certain interpretative configurations in which Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet's novels may be read.

Acknowledging the element of the arbitrary implicit in the comparative project, it is nonetheless intriguing to discover the network of interconnecting links which already exist between Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet — the two writers who are the object of

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, p42.

<sup>2</sup> *The Nouveau Roman and the Practice of Writing*, p29.

this 'comparative' study — suggesting an affinity between them that merits critical attention. I wish, therefore, to begin by retracing some of the lines of communication others have established before defining my own particular "circle" of interest, within which I hope to draw these two different writers into dialogue.

Dostoyevsky's importance as a reference point for contemporary French writing has been affirmed repeatedly by theorists and philosophers as well as by other novelists. Kaufmann notes the significance of his work to existentialism, describing *Notes from Underground* as "the best overture for existentialism ever written",<sup>3</sup> while Richard Kearney extends this link to include the phenomenologically-inspired thinkers (Ricoeur, Lévinas, Derrida, Marcuse) who have dominated the French philosophical scene in recent decades:

It is clear [...] that both groupings of first-generation existentialists — phenomenological and non-phenomenological alike — shared a common debt [...] to such nineteenth-century existentialist writers as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche or Dostoyevsky, writers whose primary concern it was to challenge the impersonal and reified systems of traditional, speculative philosophies in the name of the concrete freedom of each individual's existence.<sup>4</sup>

Dostoyevsky's place in the arena of literary theoretical debate has been further assured by the revival of interest in Bakhtin in France, largely due to the reworking of his thought by Julia Kristeva. Bakhtin's thesis on Dostoyevskysian polyphony is central to Kristeva's theory of a revolutionary writing practice in *Desire in Language*; and in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, Dostoyevsky's *The Devils* is referred to, without the Bakhtinian mediation, as an example of the psychology of abjection.<sup>5</sup> Finally, in *Le soleil noir*, Kristeva devotes a whole chapter to 'Dostoïevski, l'écriture de la souffrance et le pardon'. Initially appropriating him to testify to the contemporary crisis in representation and subjectivity, Kristeva increasingly refers to Dostoyevsky's attempts to transcend this crisis through art, and a religious quest for wholeness and healing, as these are interpreted by psychoanalysis.

In twentieth-century French literature, Dostoyevsky's name is linked with both Gide's and Camus's (Gide's critical study was influential in bringing Dostoyevsky to the attention of French readers; Camus adapted several of Dostoyevsky's novels for the theatre, and there is a considered, and intensely personal, reading of his intellectual rebels in *L'homme révolté*). More recently, Dostoyevsky has proved a significant

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<sup>3</sup> *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, p14.

<sup>4</sup> *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, pp5-6.

<sup>5</sup> See my Chapter 2 for a definition of abjection and other terms of reference in Kristeva.

reference point for writers of the New Novel group, to which Alain Robbe-Grillet belongs.<sup>6</sup> Sarraute (in *L'ère du soupçon*) and Butor (in *Répertoire I*) both discuss him in a collection of essays, and Philippe Sollers draws attention to what he sees as Dostoyevsky's special relevance to the problems facing contemporary thinkers:

Dostoïevski, à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, ouvre, avec Poe, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Mallarmé, Nietzsche, l'espace sans garanties de notre modernité bouleversée, modernité qui replonge abruptement dans les plus immémoriales interrogatoires de l'espèce.<sup>7</sup>

It is, above all, the persistent and even maniacal questioning to which Sollers refers, and which arguably permeates the whole of Dostoyevsky's writing, that is a starting point for Robbe-Grillet's own interest in Dostoyevsky. Robbe-Grillet includes Dostoyevsky in an evolutionary line of nineteenth-century writers, all of whom he believes foreshadow the tenor of New Novel uncertainties. Thus:

Non seulement l'évolution a été considérable depuis le milieu du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, mais elle a commencé tout de suite, à l'époque de Balzac lui-même. Celui-ci ne relève-t-il pas déjà de la 'confusion' dans les descriptions de la Chartreuse de Parme? [...]

Et depuis, l'évolution n'a cessé de s'accroître: Flaubert, Dostoïevski, Proust, Kafka, Joyce, Faulkner, Beckett ... [...]

Et depuis vingt ans, sans doute, les choses s'accroissent, mais ce n'est pas dans le domaine de l'art uniquement, chacun en conviendra. Si le lecteur a quelquefois du mal à se retrouver dans le roman moderne, c'est de la même façon qu'il se perd quelquefois dans le monde même où il vit, lorsque tout cède autour de lui des vieilles constructions et des vieilles normes.<sup>8</sup>

In a recent public address, Robbe-Grillet strengthened the connection further by using the novels of Dostoyevsky, along with those of Sartre and Flaubert, as examples of writing which represent the relation between world and consciousness as problematic. The play of absence and enigma that constitutes Dostoyevsky's character Stavrogin, in particular, and the resistance of the latter's confession to analysis, makes a portion of *The Devils*

<sup>6</sup> I am accepting the term 'New Novel' here as a useful if limited rubric for the group of experimental novelists writing in the 1950's-1970's and who all, in some way, challenge past literary practice. Perhaps the best 'definition' of the new Novel, however, is offered by Claude Simon: "[...] we have mentioned the characters of the Nouveau Roman. What does this mean? Which characters? And which New Novels? [...] The status of the characters in Robbe-Grillet, Butor, Pinget, Nathalie Sarraute, or myself is as different as a carp from a rabbit, a hummingbird, or a cauliflower. So what are we speaking about?" (*Three Decades of the French New Novel*, p193). When I use the term in this thesis, therefore, I will be principally "speaking about" Robbe-Grillet. This, moreover, seems to be the way in which Robbe-Grillet uses the term in *Pour un nouveau roman*.

<sup>7</sup> p10.

<sup>8</sup> *Pour un nouveau roman*, pp115-116.

"une espèce de nouveau roman" in Robbe-Grillet's eyes.<sup>9</sup> Dostoyevsky's shattering of conventional codes and responses, his troubling juxtaposition of nihilism and religion, conservatism and eccentricity, and refusal to clarify the obscurities which result, make him an exemplary figure to novelists writing in an era of suspicion.

Some of these lines of approach can easily be unravelled, or shown to be misleading. When Dostoyevsky was first introduced to French readers, for example, he was considered too alien, too hysterical and heavy-handed, and hence not particularly relevant to their style of literature. As Robert André explains:

In contrast to our literature, which was notable for its analytical spirit and elegant and orderly composition, his works seemed to be obscure, loquacious and chaotic; his characters appeared to be extravagant, and their behaviour often incomprehensible.<sup>10</sup>

Ironically, if Dostoyevsky was at first thought to be too "Russian" for the French, he was also, in some quarters, considered to be too "French" for the Russians. He was regarded with suspicion and hostility by some of his compatriots, like Count Kutchelev-Bezborodko, who, "reading one of the early novels, *The Insulted and the Injured*, exclaimed that the author could not possibly be depicting Russians; the behaviour of such outlandish characters would be admissible, and perhaps true to life, in France or in Belgium, but certainly not in Russia."<sup>11</sup> Nabokov's more recently expressed dislike of Dostoyevsky and eagerness to "debunk" him in his *Lectures on Russian Literature* completes the sense of a discontinuity between Dostoyevsky and the French or even the Russian traditions as these have sometimes been defined.

Nevertheless, in spite of these anomalies, (highlighted by the fact that Nabokov reputedly admired the novels of Robbe-Grillet, the other term in my comparison), I wish to pursue the thesis of Dostoyevsky as a forerunner for avant-garde writing with its crises of meaning and value: a thesis already implicit, in fact, in Julia Kristeva, Philippe Sollers, and Alain Robbe-Grillet. But I wish to approach this moment of crisis not,

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<sup>9</sup> 'Le vide comme générateur du texte': an oral communication given by Robbe-Grillet at the University of Canterbury, March 1986. The idea for the thesis originated in this lecture.

<sup>10</sup> 'The world-wide significance of Dostoevsky', p123. This opinion is also expressed in *French Literary Imagination and Dostoevsky and other essays*, p14. Note, however, that André acknowledges the changes that have occurred in French literary tastes, and hence, in responses to Dostoyevsky. Although he does not elaborate, he remarks "how great indeed must be the changes that have occurred in literature in comparison with the situation at the beginning of the century, for Dostoevsky to have become [...] a forerunner of the avant-garde writers!" (p125)

<sup>11</sup> *French Literary Imagination and Dostoevsky and other essays*, p3.

initially, though the “bouleversements” of modernity, but through the writings of ancient Greek scepticism — also, in its way, a discourse constructed in response to a crisis.<sup>12</sup> Scepticism could be described as the technique of argumentation which corresponds, philosophically, to the mood of suspicion with which contemporary writers are preoccupied. The fact that scepticism, since its inception by Pyrrho, has flourished in various periods throughout history, is testimony to the fact that the concern with discontinuity of which Heath writes, and the loss of confidence in systems of representation reflected in the New Novel, are not new, but old anxieties reformulated in different terms and in different historical conditions. In my discussion of Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet’s novels, therefore, I wish to propose a definition of the scepticism which informs them, and of the way in which their novels inform, or reformulate, scepticism. Do they belong to the same “ère du soupçon”, and how does their scepticism relate to the ‘tradition’ many see as having been established by Pyrrho of Elis (circa 360-275 B.C.) and later formalized by Sextus Empiricus? (circa 160-210 A.D.).<sup>13</sup> In applying criteria which are in some respects arbitrary, but not irrelevant, I shall also attempt to assess each novelist according to their own understanding of the phenomenon of uncertainty, least my chosen “instrument de précision” obscures each writer’s distinctness.

## ii. Scepticism: the philosophical context

Classical scepticism is thought to originate in the Hellenistic period of ancient Greece. While the development of scepticism as a philosophy may have a number of forerunners,<sup>14</sup> Pyrrho of Elis is the most common reference point in histories of the sceptical attitude, even though Pyrrho himself left no written record of his reflections.<sup>15</sup> It was Timon of Athens and Sextus Empiricus who were to later verbalize Pyrrho’s views and present them as the coherent philosophical outlook that has come to be known as Pyrrhonian scepticism.<sup>16</sup>

In the process of defending the sceptical discipline, the Pyrrhonist draws attention to two things, namely, the unreliability of the senses, and the contradictory ways in which sense-impressions may be received and interpreted by the mind. Without a reliable

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<sup>12</sup> See Edwyn Bevan’s account of scepticism as a response to the disruptive controversies of the Greek schools over matters of dogma. (*Stoics and Sceptics*, p124)

<sup>13</sup> These dates are given in the introduction to the English translation of *Sextus Empiricus* by R.G. Bury, Loeb Classical Library edition.

<sup>14</sup> Sedley quotes Metrodorus of Chios, Diogenes of Smyrna and Anaxarchus of Abdera in this regard, see *Doubt and Dogmatism*, p10.

<sup>15</sup> *Stoics and Sceptics*, p123.

<sup>16</sup> pp142, 146.

source of information in the senses, or a single satisfactory method of assessing information through the reasoning, the thinker is without criterion with which to determine what he knows, or even to establish if he knows, with certainty. In this case, argues the sceptic, the only option is to suspend judgement. Thus sceptical *epoche*, the reservation of judgement, is seen to be a logical response to contradictions in sense-data and in how they are to be interpreted. Since conflicting interpretations may be equally valid, and there are no authoritative grounds for preference, the result is presumed to be an "equilibrium" of evidence (*isostheneia*). By means of this argument the sceptic justifies his position, which is to suspend judgement on all matters, and enjoy the mental tranquillity (*ataraxia*) which results from abandoning an impossible quest for certainty.

As Sextus Empiricus summarizes:

Scepticism is an ability to place in antithesis, in any manner whatever, appearances and judgements, and thus — because of the equal force in the objects and arguments opposed — to come first of all to a suspension of judgement and then to mental tranquillity.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the apparent simplicity of this working definition, however, Sextus acknowledges differences amongst sceptics that are perhaps as significant as those which separate sceptic and dogmatist in matters of philosophic inquiry. In the same work cited above, he contrasts the attitude of the Pyrrhonist sceptic, for example, with that of the Academic sceptic, who in his view subscribes to a form of dogmatism by denying outright the possibility of gainful inquiry:

It is a fair presumption that when people search for a thing the result will be either its discovery, a confession of non-discovery and of its non-apprehensibility, or perseverance in the search. [...] There are some who think they have found the truth, such as Aristotle, Epicurus, the Stoics, and certain others. These are, in a special sense of the term, the so-called dogmatists. Clitomachus and Carneades, on the other hand, and other Academics, claim it is a search for inapprehensibles. But the Sceptics go on searching.<sup>18</sup>

Sextus's distinction underlines the fact that inquiry is, in principle, as important to the sceptical endeavour as are doubt and the suspension of judgement. The very term, scepticism, derives from the Greek, *skepsis*, meaning inquiry.

### iii. Sceptical dilemmas

At the same time, Sextus Empiricus isolates two potential dangers that undermine the inquiry that is the aim and starting point of sceptical endeavour, namely, dogmatic

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<sup>17</sup> Sextus Empiricus. *The Major Writings*, pp32-33.  
<sup>18</sup> p31.



assertion and dogmatic negation. In point of fact, this is a dilemma implicit in the sceptical method itself, arising from the tension between inquiry, on the one hand, and the practice of suspending judgement, on the other. For in so far as inquiry presupposes the readiness to discover, it may also lead in the direction of affirmation, while the suspension of judgement which disallows affirmation may harden into a predisposition to deny all theses on principle. Burnyeat and Striker both draw attention to the anti-sceptical tendencies inherent in the Pyrrhonian argument of *isostheneia*, which insists on the equal weight of contrary statements and relies, therefore, on a certain amount of faith in the reason's ability to assess evidence (or the lack of it). Ironically this same argument could be used by the sceptic to discredit other belief-statements, whether or not there was sufficient justification for doing so. As Burnyeat explains:

Certainly it appears to [the sceptic] that dogmatic claims are equally balanced, but this appearance, so called, being the effect of argument, is only to be made sense of in terms of reason, belief and truth — the very notions the sceptic is most anxious to avoid.<sup>19</sup>

Striker further notes how the same Pyrrhonian argument:

eventually acquired the paradoxical status of a dogma of Pyrrhonian scepticism, which could be invoked against a theory even in the absence of strong counterarguments.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, scepticism, which may be defined as a "thesis" that nothing can be known, and a "recommendation" that judgement should be suspended,<sup>21</sup> reveals its propensity to develop into a negative form of knowledge and a perversion, therefore, of its own programme of inquiry. Yet by Sextus's own admission, systematic doubt is inconsistent with the sceptic's self-representation as one who "[keeps] on searching". To maintain the balance inherent in his position the sceptic must doubt "even that he doubts".<sup>22</sup>

If scholars are agreed that dogmatic assertion and negation are equally inconsistent with scepticism, they differ as to whether the Pyrrhonists or the Academics were the more predisposed to dogmatism, and vary in their estimation of what a sceptic can affirm (or negate) before s/he lapses into this 'unsceptical' frame of mind. Richard Popkin upholds Sextus Empiricus when he attributes negative dogmatism to the Academics and the more constructive approach to the Pyrrhonists, who, he claims, avoided the false certainties

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<sup>19</sup> 'Can the sceptic live his scepticism?', *Doubt and Dogmatism*, p50.

<sup>20</sup> 'Sceptical strategies', p58.

<sup>21</sup> p54.

<sup>22</sup> As Emerson phrases it, cited in *The Subtle Knot*, p22.

associated with the maxim that nothing is certain.<sup>23</sup> David Sedley, on the other hand, contrasts Pyrrho, who “seems to have held purely and simply that nothing can be known”, with one of his forerunners, Metrodorus of Chios, who was prepared to turn “his profession of ignorance against itself”, and so concede “that inquiry was still worthwhile”.<sup>24</sup> Gisela Striker and Andrew Long both seem to see the Academic Carneades’s theory of probability as promoting a more flexible form of scepticism than that proposed by Pyrrho of Elis.<sup>25</sup> And Striker implicitly reverses the categories proposed by Sextus Empiricus when she suggests that the reluctance to admit the possibility of forming “reasonable” opinions within the sceptical framework “really misses the point by identifying Academic scepticism with the more radical Pyrrhonist position, which does indeed exclude the possibility of justified belief”.<sup>26</sup>

This intellectual dilemma marks the history of scepticism, from its beginnings in ancient Greece, right through the Reformation period, and up until its present renaissance in the labyrinths of postmodernist scepticism. How much can be affirmed before intellectual caution is sacrificed and how much negated before inquiry is threatened by nihilism?

One of the most influential of the Reformation sceptics, Michel de Montaigne, apparently combined sceptical doubt with religious faith, thus achieving a ‘sceptical’ balance between negation and affirmation. Consequently, Popkin places Montaigne in the fideist tradition of scepticism, which allowed for “complete doubt on the rational level” while maintaining “a religion based on faith alone, given to us not by our own capabilities but solely by God’s Grace”.<sup>27</sup> As might be expected, critics differ in their estimation of Montaigne’s self-doubting faith: was doubt an extension of his faith or faith a cover for private inclinations toward doubt? While it is impossible to build windows into a man’s soul, or unravel the complexities of intentionality, the arguments obtainable from Montaigne’s writings suggest some interaction between faith and doubt is envisaged. More particularly, the *Essais* demonstrate the latter’s awareness of the dangers inherent in an uncritical doubt, and Montaigne’s readiness to judge his scorn for the credulous as unworthy of an inquiring mind could be taken as a plea for counterbalancing doubt with faith:

condamner ainsi resoluement une chose pour fauce et impossible, c’est se donner l’avantage d’avoir dans la teste les bornes et les limites de la volonté de Dieu et

<sup>23</sup> *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, ppixiii, xv, 126.

<sup>24</sup> ‘The Protagonists’, *Doubt and Dogmatism*, p10.

<sup>25</sup> See A.A. Long’s *Hellenistic Philosophy* for a helpful discussion of Academic scepticism.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Sceptical Strategies’, p57.

<sup>27</sup> *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, pp52-53.

de la puissance de nostre mere nature; et qu'il n'y a point de plus notable folie au monde que de les ramener à la mesure de nostre capacité et suffisance.<sup>28</sup>

Montaigne thus argues the case for a doubt that is qualified by a sceptical corrective, equatable in this instance with the *readiness* to believe what is as yet unproven.

Particularly germane to postmodern expressions of the sceptical position is Montaigne's referral of the philosophic dilemmas of scepticism to problems of language. Having drawn attention in the 'Apologie de Raimond Sebond' to the difficulties of interpretation plaguing legal and theological debate, Montaigne goes on to outline the problems that confront the sceptic when attempting to formulate his arguments:

Je voy les philosophes Pyrrhoniens qui ne peuvent exprimer leur generale conception en aucune maniere de parler; car, il leur faudrait un nouveau langage. Le nostre est tout formé de propositions affirmatives, qui leur sont du tout ennemies. De façon que, quand ils disent: 'Je doute', on les tient incontinent à la gorge pour leur faire avouer qu'au moins assurent et sçavent ils cela, qu'ils doutent.<sup>29</sup>

The sceptic's problem, Montaigne argues, is that he is attempting to express hesitancy and doubt in a language which operates in a primarily affirmative manner, making it impossible to question the adequacy of a concept without bringing in another equally dubious one in the formulation of the difficulty. Such 'suspicion' of language and its function in relation to the way we represent the world might well appear extremely 'modern', although it equally demonstrates that the questioning of forms of intelligibility is not an exclusively modern phenomenon.

The radical linguistic scepticism of Jacques Derrida in more recent decades, could be seen as a logical development of the reservations of earlier philosophers like Montaigne.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> 'C'est folie de rapporter le vray et le faux a nostre suffisance', *Essais I*, pp227-228. Note Dostoyevsky's more extreme formulation of this thesis, as discussed in my Chapter 5, pp218-224.

<sup>29</sup> 'Apologie de Raimond Sebond, *Essais II*, pp192-193.

<sup>30</sup> The relationship between ancient Greek and postmodern scepticism is a matter of debate amongst critics and philosophers. Jay Cantor argues that "Deconstruction is a classical skeptical argument, recast using linguistic metaphors" (cited in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, p7), and this view is shared by Christopher Norris (*Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, pxii) and Howard Felperin (*Beyond Deconstruction*, p131). Steven Fuller specifies "the deconstructionist, in his dedication to indeterminacy, is probably the long-lost descendent of our classical skeptics — only instead of 'nature' we should now read 'text' in his assaults on intentionality" ('Is there a language-game that even the deconstructionist can play?' p106).

However, Glidden believes the ancient sceptics elaborated their philosophy in response to the requirements of social needs and realities whereas for the post-modernist, scepticism is an "academic form of sport" divorced from "life" ('From pyrrhonism to post-modernism', p265). Cascardi suggests there is an important difference between "skeptical doubt" and "deconstructionist indeterminacy", the

Unlike Montaigne, however, Derrida is prepared to place not only the Western philosophical framework in question — “sous rature” as he phrases it — but also the subject in whom this discourse has previously been centered. This means the thinker is denied that sense of mastery over his own doubts which is still implicit in Montaigne when he insists in ‘Du repentir’, for example, that nothing lies outside the scrutiny of his personal judgement.<sup>31</sup> For Derrida, everything, including the subject and his own self-consciousness, is caught up in the determinations of language so that the thinker as well as the object of his reflections is never entirely the same, never entirely representable (being re-presentable in a number of different contexts), and hence not in a ‘position’ to make statements about truth and error, certainty and doubt. The thinker owes his very self-concept to the effects of language within which he operates.<sup>32</sup> This refusal to set any boundaries on doubt results in a more radical indeterminacy than that envisaged by the Pyrrhonist sceptic, who is still prepared to make categorical distinctions in his formulation of the arguments which prompt him to reserve judgement. Chapter 1 of the thesis will thus attempt to define these different modes of uncertainty, conflictual and indeterminate, as they are reflected in the style of a narrative.

The mutual fallibility of language and language-users, which post-modernists such as Derrida indicate, could be said to complete the negative ‘evidence’ of the early Pyrrhonists who began by emphasizing the fallibility of sense-impressions. Indeed, so negative does this recent manifestation of scepticism appear that it could easily be

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latter calling into question the terms and boundaries of sceptical debate as well as its object (‘Skepticism and deconstruction’, pp2-3). Wolfgang Fuchs amplifies both these views, concluding that ‘Post-modernism is perhaps more correctly approached as a temperament or tendency of thought rather than a philosophical school’ (‘Post-modernism is not a scepticism’, p395). He summarizes the different forms of relativity resulting from the epistemological reservations of the ancient sceptic and the ontological doubts of the post-modernist thus: “Being is what it is [for Pyrrho], but the knower is not adequate to know it. Thus, the relativity of knowledge. For Derrida however, it is not that based on this relativity there are possible varying interpretations of reality, but rather, that interpretation is originary”. (p398-399)

<sup>31</sup> See p28 of ‘Du Repentir’: “je n’ai guere de mouvement qui se cache et desrobe à ma raison, et qui ne se conduise à peu près par le consentement de toutes mes parties”(Essais III). Compare, however, the ‘deconstructionist’ tenor of the remarks in the ‘Apologie’ p267: “Car [...] si nous demeurons tousjours mesmes et uns, comment est-ce que nous nous esjouissons maintenant d’une chose, et maintenant d’une autre? [...] Ainsi, quant et l’estre tout un, change aussi l’estre simplement, devenant tousjours autre d’un autre.”

<sup>32</sup> See A.J. Cascardi for a brief discussion of this view and the way in which it contrasts with Pyrrhonism: “The skeptic remains always in possession of his own consciousness [...] The skeptic’s greatest worry is that what he thinks he sees as the external world may also be a product of his consciousness. [...] By contrast, the deconstructionist who loses the world in a web of language is saying that it would do no good to try to get ‘behind’ the Cartesian (or Husserlian) Cogito, because there is no such place in which to aspire” (‘Skepticism and deconstruction’, p6).

interpreted as the ultimate in negative dogmatism, encouraging a “jaded resignation to the impossibility of truth”.<sup>33</sup> But like many sceptics before him, Derrida rejects the nihilist label others would apply, stressing his intention, rather, to defer the nihilist impasse by opening the text to a more rigorous assessment of its assumptions and a greater diversity, therefore, of interpretation. This reading of the activity of deconstruction is confirmed by sympathetic critics of his work, such as Norris (*Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, p2), Felperin (*Beyond Deconstruction*, p118) and Hart (*The Trespass of the Sign*, p19). What could be called a creative proliferation of meaning is arguably a corollary of negation in Derrida’s play of *différance*, the Pyrrhonist ideal of suspended judgement thus being reformulated in a new way.

#### iv. The sceptic disposition in literature

Where do Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet fit into these ongoing intellectual manoeuvres? Both writers have a philosophic turn of mind which enables them to play with ideas that are more formally debated by philosophers and theorists, and this means that their novels are susceptible of analysis in semi-philosophic terms. However, both enjoy the maddening grace of inconsistency, so that no one system of reference is adequate to encompass the patterns of meaning and indeterminacy in their novels. This is largely because of their commitment to the imaginative rather than the analytical adventure in their writing. Where a certain form of philosophic scepticism, for example, aims to foster “not a passion to create values, but a calm acceptance of, and detachment from, whatever happens”,<sup>34</sup> Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet’s whole *raison d’être* as novelists springs from this passion to create alternative worlds, and from the desire to then defend the validity of those worlds in the face of more conventional habits of thinking.

Despite the distinction which needs to be made between novelist and philosopher, however, I would suggest that many of the dilemmas common to the formulation and defence of the sceptic philosophy are also reflected in Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet’s

<sup>33</sup> See Terry Eagleton’s remarks to this effect in *Literary Theory: an Introduction*, pp143-144.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Post-modernism is not a scepticism’, p398. According to the terms of reference in W.F. Fuchs’s article this makes Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet not sceptics but post-modernists, after the style of Nietzsche. Fuchs quotes Nietzsche’s *Will to Power*: “What inspires the Skeptic? Hatred of the dogmatist — or a need for rest, a weariness, as in the case of Pyrrho”. (p396) And he comments: “That this doctrine clashes with the Nietzschean intention is obvious. It is not tranquillity of the soul, but the will to power that is the measure of life; it is not the avoidance of disturbances that is the way, but rather its embrace that is proposed when Zarathustra says, ‘one must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star’”. (p398) The relevance of Nietzsche’s will to power to literary scepticism is something I wish to explore in my fifth chapter.

works. The sceptical interplay of doubt with belief, for example, and the attempt to sustain a critical discourse while casting aspersions on the terms in which this discourse is articulated, creates special problems in Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet's narratives, and these will be examined in Chapter 2.

The difficulty of maintaining a critical perspective is compounded when scepticism about truth-claims and meta-narratives extends to the ability to know and respond to other minds. The problem of responding to the challenge of other minds is arguably implicit in the epistemological scepticism of Pyrrho (in other words, things exist and have their own particular nature, but this nature cannot be known with certainty), as it is in the ontological doubts of post-modernism (the 'essence' of things is itself the product of conventional modes of perception and linguistic expression). The basis of Pyrrhonist speculation is not the thing-in-itself, which is presumed inaccessible,<sup>35</sup> but the object as perceived, and more especially, the object as perceived by *me* as an individual. M.F. Burnyeat argues that this attitude risks closing off important avenues for dialogue about the object, allowing the thinker to take refuge in subjectivism:

When Sextus says that a man's impression is *azetetos*, not subject to enquiry [...] the claim is that his report that this is how it appears to him cannot be challenged and he cannot properly be required to give reason, evidence or proof for it. [...] It follows that the sceptic who adheres strictly to appearance is withdrawing to the safety of a position not open to challenge or enquiry.<sup>36</sup>

Of course the Pyrrhonist's reponse to this is that a readiness to reflect on the object, whether this be the external world in general or a personal other in particular, is no guarantee of an escape from the idealist enclosures of the mind. How can the thinker be sure s/he is gaining in understanding of the other and not simply exploring his/her own projected interpretations? Robbe-Grillet emphasizes this very difficulty through the obsessive mentality of his hero-narrators, who seem only to confirm the subjective idealism for which Pyrrhonism lays some of the groundwork. Dostoyevsky, on the other hand, interprets this sceptical deadlock as a challenge, not an impossibility, representing a form of personal interaction in which the hero-narrator is still conditioned by perceptual habits, but where the other retains the power to interject, and so, to challenge the narrator's perceptions. The transferral of sceptical dilemmas into the arena of characterization in Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet, and the implications this has for the nature of their scepticism, are topics I will examine in Chapter 3.

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<sup>35</sup> *Hellenistic Philosophy*, p81.

<sup>36</sup> *Doubt and Dogmatism*, p36.

Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet's narrators are subject to a challenge from without in the other. But they are equally undermined from within, as their own imaginations threaten the stability of their narratives. In Chapter 4 I will consider the ways in which Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet extend their representation of scepticism beyond its philosophical aspects to include its psychological dimension, depicting the impact on the imagination of the phenomena of doubt and unknowing. While Robbe-Grillet theoretically responds to uncertainty playfully, seeing in the absence of authoritative meanings a licence to create without reserve, he, like Dostoyevsky, demonstrates the fragility of the consciousness as it confronts its own nothingness and realizes its capacity to 'undo' itself in a vertigo of doubt and insecurity. The sceptic Montaigne has already recognized the imagination's power to disrupt man's relation to himself and his world in a manner that may be more disturbing than the most subtle philosophic sophistry:

Nous tressuons, nous tremblons, nous pallissons et rougissons aux secousses de nos imaginations, et renversez dans la plume sentons nostre corps agité à leur bransle, quelques-fois jusques à en expirer.<sup>37</sup>

This 'flaw' of consciousness constitutes a source of vulnerability to which Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet's hero-narrators seem, nonetheless, irresistably attracted, flirting uneasily with their own destruction. The surfacing of an anxiety that is so contrary to the Pyrrhonist ideal of *ataraxia* (mental tranquillity), helps define the tenor of Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet's scepticism, while complementing a lack in empirical philosophical scepticism, which sidesteps the challenge of the irrational.

In the manner of Plato's *pharmakon*, however, it is the imagination in Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet that helps 'cure' the dis-ease it provokes, as the order of words and narrative structures gives form to nameless terrors and acts as a reminder of authorial control. Mastery over psychological uncertainty is partially assured through the process of its articulation. At the same time, the imagination, with all its uncertainties, is a defence against what is perceived by the novelists as a greater threat, namely, the restrictions of institutional order. The kind of dogma that confines belief to formula, and orders doubt according to categories, cramps intellectual freedom and imaginative whimsy. Doubt and uncertainty are seen as positive in so far as they help stimulate reformulations of preconceived ideas while provoking the kind of restlessness that is often a prelude to creativity. In Chapter 5, therefore, the rationale behind Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet's scepticism will be contrasted with what appears to have been a strong motivation for Pyrrhonist scepticism, namely, the desire for tranquillity, both mental and emotional. Bevan describes the scepticism of the ancient Greeks as an

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<sup>37</sup> 'De la force de l'imagination', *Essais I*, pp143-144.

attempt to withdraw from the disturbance of Academic controversies over dogma: "this was just what Pyrrho's wisdom came to, *ataraxia*, not to bother oneself. The unhappy desire to know was the cause of all the fever and fret, the polemical passion and torturing doubt". Hence Pyrrho's scepticism could be conceived as "the expression of weariness, of disgust with the endless strife of tongues, of the relief found in mere ceasing from effort".<sup>38</sup>

The Pyrrhonist's desire to draw back from heated controversy is what sets him apart most decisively from the mood of the two novelists' scepticism.<sup>39</sup> In Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet's case scepticism is conceived, in part, as a defence against an anticipated lack of controversy, and against the stasis represented by intellectual and psychological limitation. Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet could therefore be said to be affirming a value through their "torturing doubt", namely, creative freedom.

In each of the ensuing chapters several works by Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet will be examined in the light of the sceptical dilemmas and possibilities outlined above: the use of contradiction to represent uncertainty in Chapter 1; the balance between negation and affirmation and the difficulty of formulating a critical discourse in Chapter 2; the encounter with the other and activation of self-doubt in Chapter 3; the resurfacing of anxiety and its partial transcendence through the imagination in Chapter 4; the rejection of tranquillity and cultivation of sceptical doubt in defence of freedom in Chapter 5. The choice of several texts by each novelist to explore these avenues of inquiry allows for a more balanced presentation of the problems in question and enables some of the distinctions between novelists, and between their texts and the framework I have imposed on them, to be maintained. Literary and/or philosophic theory is used in the definition of terms of reference employed in each chapter, particularly since terms such as 'other' and 'dialogue' come with the 'trace' of their diverse and often complex usage in contemporary theoretical discourse. In the final analysis, however, the literary texts provide the most convincing response to the scepticism that informs them. If doubt is insufficient grounds for a systematic philosophy it proves a rich field for imaginative fantasy and speculation.

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<sup>38</sup> *Stoics and Sceptics*, p124.

<sup>39</sup> I am, therefore, rejecting the unqualified association of Robbe-Grillet with Sextus Empiricus found in Dominick Grundy's nonetheless lucid study, *Sceptical Consistency: Scepticism in Literary Texts of Montaigne, Sir Thomas Browne and Alain Robbe-Grillet* (concentrating on Montaigne's essay, 'De la vanité', Sir Thomas Browne's 'Urne-Burial', and Robbe-Grillet's *Dans le labyrinthe*). In particular, Grundy's comparison of Robbe-Grillet and Sextus Empiricus with respect to *ataraxia* (p85) seems to me inappropriate for reasons given in my Chapter 5.



# 1 Pro and contra: contradiction and difference as indices of sceptical uncertainty

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Now, the principle fundamental to the existence of Scepticism is the proposition, "To every argument an equal argument is opposed," for we believe that it is in consequence of this principle that we are brought to a point where we cease to dogmatize. (Sextus Empiricus)

## I. i. Contradiction or difference? The problem of definition

The ability to formulate contradictory statements makes deciding on a single point of view, or reasoning one's way to an authoritative truth, a neverending exercise. Meeting argument with counter-argument is thus endemic to sceptical tactics since it provides a demonstration of the reasons for suspending judgement and embracing nescience. In a 1986 lecture Robbe-Grillet made a similar connection to the sceptic between contradictions and more contemporary uncertainties about the mind's relationship to itself and the world around it. Hegel, Flaubert, Sartre, Dostoyevsky were all cited in the lecture as writers responsible for questioning the mind/world relationship through their acknowledgement of mutability, lacuna in evidence, discontinuities in chronology, contradiction in interpretation. The exploration of the phenomenon of uncertainty in their writing distinguished them from confident essentialist and rationalist writers and allied them, in Robbe-Grillet's mind, to his own writing practice and experiments with what one critic has called "le doute systématique".<sup>1</sup> Without making any direct reference to the tradition of scepticism Robbe-Grillet's discussion of contradictions and uncertainty seems to lead in the direction of the sceptic, given the latter's relation of contradictory arguments to *epoché*, or, the refusal to make definitive judgements. It is my intention to use the sceptical framework I believe is to some degree implicit in Robbe-Grillet's lecture (and elsewhere in his essays and addresses),<sup>2</sup> as a means of reading his own and Dostoyevsky's novels, concentrating in this chapter on the dramatization of sceptical uncertainty through the two writers' use of contradiction in the narrative.

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<sup>1</sup> Olga Bernal, in *Alain Robbe-Grillet: le roman de l'absence*, p9.

<sup>2</sup> See for example the comment in a 1961 essay: "les significations du monde, autour de nous, ne sont plus que partielles, provisoires, contradictoires même, et toujours contestées". (*Pour un nouveau roman*, p120) Note also Robbe-Grillet's insistence at a 1982 colloquium on the importance of "severances, faults, ambiguities, mobilities, fragmentation, contradiction" in the novel, to demonstrate the incomprehensibility of the world in the author's as well as the character's mind. (*Three Decades of the French New Novel*, p24)

In the same way Robbe-Grillet interprets the use of contradiction as the hallmark of a sceptically-oriented literature, his remarks on this and other occasions suggest that, similarly, the absence of contradiction indicates a dogmatic and reassuring view of the world. Balzac is often cited in this regard, his *Comédie humaine* being associated by Robbe-Grillet with the image of "un univers stable, cohérent, continu, univoque, entièrement déchiffrable".<sup>3</sup> The 1957 judgement is confirmed in *Le miroir qui revient* (1984), where Robbe-Grillet contrasts Balzac's texts, "sans contradiction ni manque", with the writings of those who seek to explore "les oppositions insolubles, les éclatements, les apories diégétiques, les cassures, les vides [...]".<sup>4</sup>

A distinction is thus set up between two kinds of writing, the contradictory and intellectually challenging versus the non-contradictory and intellectually complacent, Robbe-Grillet's preference being clearly for the former of these two categories. Like most definitions, however, Robbe-Grillet's is exclusive while also implying a hierarchical and potentially misleading value-judgement. The reading of Balzac, for example, as a straightforward and ideologically naïve writer is itself ideologically blinkered, overlooking the painful ironies in such works as *Sarrasine* that Barthes has responded to with such infinite and inventive subtlety. Contrary to Robbe-Grillet, Barthes represents Balzac's *Sarrasine* as having potentially revolutionary ideological implications because of the challenge to conventional opposites inherent in its theme of castration and (sexual) absence which transgresses the "mur des contraires".<sup>5</sup> In Barthes' commentary Balzac becomes a highly ambivalent writer, not because he avoids contradictions, nor because he exploits them, but because he unsettles the logic on which they traditionally depend.

If Robbe-Grillet is too glibly dismissive of Balzac as a writer "sans contradiction ni manque", and so without ambivalence, there is a possibility that he also misidentifies the import of contradictions in Dostoyevsky, and with that the supposed affinity between them. For Barthes' discussion of the theme of opposites in *Sarrasine* underlines a second difficulty introduced by the lecture on contradiction which has to do with the contemporary interest in challenging the law of contradiction because of its dependence on certain philosophical unities. These categories of thought are no longer accepted uncritically by writers such as Barthes, Derrida and Deleuze, who have attempted to expose their artificiality and authoritarian exclusiveness. The process of freeing the

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<sup>3</sup> *Pour un nouveau roman*, p31.

<sup>4</sup> *Le miroir qui revient*, p212.

<sup>5</sup> *S/Z*, p221. Barthes's definition of the text's revolutionary aspects is, however, a definition against ideology in so far as "la valeur idéologique d'un texte [...] est une valeur de représentation, non de production". (*S/Z*, p10)

literary text from its subservience to formulae must therefore begin, according to Barthes, "par simple débarras de ce vieux spectre: la contradiction logique".<sup>6</sup>

In fact, Barthes is expounding a view Robbe-Grillet himself has expressed in essays and novels with respect to art's subversion of classical antinomies and, more especially, of the ideological systems that subtend them.<sup>7</sup> And where Barthes's reading of opposites in Balzac opens the text, not only to pluralism, but also to the threat of nothingness by virtue of a negation of its own themes (see p220 of *S/Z*), Robbe-Grillet, too, establishes a connection between the play of contradictions in literature and a movement of erasure, or, "vacuité", whereby grounds for formulating concepts are negated rather than problematized. This was a point made in the same lecture where he instituted the comparison with Dostoyevsky, and reinforced in works such as *Le miroir qui revient*.<sup>8</sup> Instead of complexity, then, contradictions may signify absence, instead of many paths, no paths. Given the fact that Dostoyevsky employs a form of binary opposition in his novels, and that his writing is informed by a recognizable ideological perspective, a superficial examination of terms leaves the grounds for dialogue between the two writers looking unconvincing.

In the first instance the apparent inconsistency between Robbe-Grillet's preference for contradictions and his (Barthesian) desire to subvert them highlights the need for a more detailed account of what may be meant by the term 'contradiction'. Aristotle's classical definition of contradiction, invites comparison with its critical reevaluation by Barthes, Robbe-Grillet and others, after which its function in the literary text can be more readily assessed. A preliminary definition of terms suggests the link between the use of contradiction in a literary text and the philosophical attitude known as scepticism is by no means an automatic one. In practice, both Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet move outside of their philosophical assumptions, so there is something approaching traditional contradiction as well as Barthesian "glissements" of meaning in both their texts. The novels selected for this discussion — Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from Underground*, Robbe-Grillet's *La jalousie* and *Projet pour une révolution à New York* — demonstrate this shifting philosophical allegiance. At the same time, the novels question the categories we apply to experience in a manner suggestive of sceptical

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<sup>6</sup> *Le plaisir du texte*, p9.

<sup>7</sup> See *Pour un nouveau roman*, p143, where Robbe-Grillet represents the novel as working to undermine "antinomies catégoriques" like "fond-forme, objectivité-subjectivité, signification-absurdité, construction-destruction", etc.

<sup>8</sup> See p216 of *Le miroir qui revient* for a passing remark on the void at the heart of *Le voyeur* in contrast with the uncertainty prevalent in Dostoyevsky. See also my Chapter 3 (pp106-108) for further comment on Robbe-Grillet's views of consciousness in relation to radical absence.

concerns, thus reopening the channels for dialogue first suggested by Robbe-Grillet, and which the two writers' theoretical differences appear to obstruct.

#### I. ii. The challenge to Aristotle's law of contradiction (Nietzsche, Derrida, Barthes and Robbe-Grillet)

In Aristotle, a contradiction occurs when a statement in the affirmative is followed by one in the negative. If the affirmative and negative statements refer to the same aspect of the same thing, it is assumed that one or other of the statements is false. This is known as the law of the excluded middle. If a different aspect of the thing is referred to, or if the application is different in either case — if, for example, it is universal in one and particular in the other — then both positive and negative statements may be true at the same time. Aristotle sets this out clearly in his 'De Interpretatione' :

Of contradictory statements about a universal taken universally it is necessary for one or the other to be true or false; similarly if they are about particulars [...] But if they are about a universal not taken universally it is not always the case that one is true and the other false. For it is true to say at the same time that a man is white and that a man is not white, or that a man is noble and a man is not noble (for if base, then not noble; and if something is becoming something, then it is not that thing) [...] <sup>9</sup>

There is nothing inherently problematic about the classical definition of contradiction. It is a consequence of the laws of logic and can be resolved accordingly. The difficulty is that the laws of logic according to which the contradiction is formulated and resolved in Aristotle are not themselves open to question. The law of contradiction thus rests on the confidence that the categories of thought with which we understand and interpret the world are adequate, and that true knowledge is attainable. On the basis of such confidence, anything that does not fit in with the agreed categories may be judged anomalous and, in this guise, be reassimilated on the periphery of the chosen system of reference.<sup>10</sup>

In his essay, *Rhetoric of Persuasion*, de Man quotes Nietzsche's response to the "ontological confidence" which supports Aristotle's treatise on contradiction:

If, according to Aristotle, the *law of contradiction* is the most certain of all principles [...] then one should consider all the more rigorously what presuppositions [...] already lie at the bottom of it. Either it asserts something about actual entities, as if one already knew this from some other source; namely

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<sup>9</sup> 'De Interpretatione', *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, p28.

<sup>10</sup> Note that Sextus Empiricus includes Aristotle amongst those "dogmatists" who "think they have found the truth" in *Sextus Empiricus. The Major Writings*, p31.

that opposite attributes *cannot* be ascribed to them [...] Or the proposition means: opposite attributes *should* not be ascribed to it [...] In that case, logic would be an imperative, *not* to know the true [...] but to posit [...] and arrange a world that *should be true for us*.<sup>11</sup>

The point that Nietzsche argues and contemporary theorists have since pursued is that nothing in our habits of thought can be assumed reliable, and what seemed to be a reasonable foundation for thinking is itself the product of a limited system of concepts rather than a given that precedes it. Nietzsche questions whether thought has any demonstrable foundation, and whether it is even possible to justify the notion of an overall unity called 'Being', divisible into the categories which enable something like normative knowledge to be posited. This reflection is shared by a number of post-modernist theorists like Barthes, Derrida and Deleuze, and anticipated by the ancient Pyrrhonists whose awareness of the fallibility and diversity of human judgement motivated their mistrust of thought-systems that seek to disguise this fundamental difficulty. Pyrrho, for example, argued that there is no way of knowing whether our perceptions are true or false because we cannot be sure of what things are "really" like". In other words, there is no touchstone for testing and proving the truth of our perceptions. The diversity of interpretation that ancient and modern sceptics see as arising from the absence of any philosopher's stone implies a number of different contexts for thought, in which all categories of meaning, including those of true and false, are constantly displaced. For the sceptic, whether ancient or modern, the truth or falsehood of contrary statements lacks its Aristotelean self-evidence.

Nietzsche suggests an alternative to classical logic by replacing the notion of 'being' with that of 'becoming'. This last reflects not merely the changeability of things, but also their evasion of our attempts to contain and identify them. "Becoming", Nietzsche argues, never achieves a "*final state*" and so cannot be authoritatively named and categorized. It is:

of equivalent value every moment; the sum of its values always remains the same; in other words, it has no value at all, for anything against which to measure it, and in relation to which the word 'value' would have meaning, is lacking.<sup>12</sup>

Nietzsche thus foregrounds what was a parenthetical reference in Aristotle ("if something is becoming something, then it *is not* that thing"), pushing it to its extreme conclusion, and making it the shifting ground on which philosophic maps can be drawn and redrawn indefinitely.

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<sup>11</sup> Cited in *Allegories of Reading*, p120.

<sup>12</sup> *The Will to Power*, p378.

Assuming, like Nietzsche, the absence of a “master word” that could act as an authoritative starting point for reasoning and interpretation, Derrida is another thinker who, more recently, has placed the Aristotelean concept of being “under erasure”, and challenged the philosophical oppositions that such a concept makes possible.<sup>13</sup> “Car ce qui s’y met précisément en question”, argues Derrida, “c’est la requête d’un commencement de droit, d’un point de départ absolu, d’une responsabilité principielle [sic]”.<sup>14</sup> Where there is no place to begin, no reliable perspective on what is being ‘thought’, there is nothing to ensure that the distinctions used in cognition are the ‘right’ ones. For Aristotle’s law of the excluded middle, therefore, which does not allow a statement and its contrary to be true at the same time, Derrida proposes the practice of “différance”, which occupies the forbidden middle ground and posits, not the equal truth of contrary statements, but their mutual dependence on a differential system that lacks “positive terms” with the power to fix the value of its elements. Opposition may thus be reappraised as a “theoretical fiction”<sup>15</sup>, and the attempt to represent it as anything else is viewed as an unjustifiable act of authoritarianism:

[La différence] ne commande rien, ne règne sur rien et n’exerce nulle part aucune autorité. [...] Non seulement il n’y a pas de royaume de la différence mais celle-ci foment la subversion de tout royaume.<sup>16</sup>

Roland Barthes occupies a similar position to Derrida with respect to the categorical antinomies of philosophy, and echoes Derrida’s reluctance to define this position as anything but a refusal of all positions. Barthes does elaborate the twin notions of “plaisir” and “jouissance”, however, (ironically dependent on some hard and fast boundaries of Barthes’ devizing, such as wholeness/fragmentation, legalism/anarchy) by means of which he affirms his preference for a style of writing which, like “différance”, subverts opposites and the ideological framework in which they might be seen to operate. The law of opposites, Barthes contends, relies on blind faith in some unchangeable essence outside the slippages of language and which Barthes calls an “altérité originelle”.<sup>17</sup> Without this “altérité originelle”, the categories by which

<sup>13</sup> See pxxix of Gayatri Spivak’s introduction to the English translation of Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* for a comparison of Nietzsche’s subversion of classical opposition with Derrida’s practice of “différance”.

<sup>14</sup> ‘La différence’ in *Marges de la philosophie*, p6.

<sup>15</sup> p20, quoting Freud in the essay ‘La différence’.

<sup>16</sup> p22.

<sup>17</sup> *S/Z*, p47. cf Derrida’s rejection of the transcendent signified implicit in Lévi-Strauss’s conception of the ‘other’ culture as a model “de la bonté originelle et naturelle [...] l’index d’une bonne nature enfouie [...] par rapport auquel on pourrait dessiner la structure, le devenir et surtout la dégradation de notre société et de notre

moral as well as philosophical judgements are made are broken down, and the conflict that might arise from a difference in opinion or a transgression of certain laws is evaded, "frappé d'insignifiance".<sup>18</sup> In the "texte de plaisir", writes Barthes, "les forces contraires ne sont plus en état de refoulement, mais de devenir: rien n'est vraiment antagoniste, tout est pluriel".<sup>19</sup>

As the lecture on contradiction demonstrates, Robbe-Grillet is ambivalent on the subject, seeming to argue equally for the dissolution and reinstatement of contradiction in the text. In addition, he displays a marked enjoyment of anything resembling conflict and it is perhaps this as much as any thought-out philosophical objection that finally distinguishes his thinking from Barthes, for example, for whom avoidance is a strategy for dealing with, and, perversely, triumphing over, conflict.<sup>20</sup> Otherwise, Robbe-Grillet raises some of the same objections as Barthes on the problem, arguing, in 'Pourquoi j'aime Barthes', that contradictions in the classical tradition (in which he includes Hegel as well as Aristotle) are rigidly controlled by the belief in a higher reality whose nature is presumed fixed, once and for all. He contrasts this and its potential closure of the sign system with the openendedness of meaning theoretically achieved by the play of "glissements":

la pensée conceptuelle pouvait trembler, mais trembler autour d'un axe fixe,... elle a besoin d'un noyau de sens solide qui va l'empêcher de couler... la structure de glissement est complètement opposée, dans la mesure où elle abandonne sans cesse les positions qu'elle fait semblant d'avoir conquises.<sup>21</sup>

Like Derrida and Barthes, Robbe-Grillet objects to the authoritarian implications of the attempt to impose unity on interpretation through dictating its boundaries and terms of expression, and he reflects a Nietzschean preference for "un devenir sans projet"<sup>22</sup> to account for the mutations in the text and in human experience generally. These fluctuations are too subtle to be formally categorized or related to a purposeful movement,

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culture". (*De la grammatologie*, p168) See also Mieke Taat's comments in *Nouveau roman : hier, aujourd'hui I*, "Dieu est le maître des disjonctions exclusives [...]". (UGE 1972, p28)

<sup>18</sup> *Le plaisir du texte*, p27.

<sup>19</sup> p52.

<sup>20</sup> The perversity resides in refusing the language of conflict (see p50 of *Le plaisir du texte*: "Le plaisir du texte (la jouissance du texte) est au contraire comme un effacement brusque de la valeur guerrière, une desquamation passagère des ergots de l'écrivain [...]") while using, at the same time, the language of victory and triumph, affirming the certainty, in other words, of always winning (in the Sadean text there are "rien que des triomphes").

<sup>19</sup> p255, 'Pourquoi j'aime Barthes'. cf Gilles Deleuze on the pairing and resolution of opposites in Aristotle and Hegel: "la contradiction se résout, et se résolvant, résout la différence en la rapportant à un fondement". (*Différence et répétition*, p64 )

<sup>22</sup> *Pour un nouveau roman*, p108.

or telos (such as absolute Spirit in Hegel's dialectic, for example). In the novel they may create little more than a:

glissement d'une scène à la même scène qui se répète sous une forme à peine détournée, à peine contournée, à peine retournée.<sup>23</sup>

This is a far remove from Aristotle's law of contradiction. As I hope to show with reference to *La jalousie* and *Projet*, Robbe-Grillet's "structure de glissements" frequently involves quite minor alterations in the details of a repeated scene, or in the gradual metamorphosis from a banal object to a figure of fantasy.

### I. iii. "coexistence without confusion of opposite voices" in Dostoyevsky

Dostoyevsky seems to operate within a frame of reference that is foreign to both Aristotle and his post-modern detractors. A single character in his novels can be both "base" and "noble", "true" and "false", thus contravening Aristotle's ruling on the exclusiveness of contradictory statements when applied to particulars. Yet at the same time, the use of such true/false distinctions suggests a degree of acceptance on Dostoyevsky's part of terms that have no philosophic or moral validity in Derrida, Barthes or Robbe-Grillet. The title of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* sets up a clear opposition in the mind of the reader between the law and its transgression and further creates an expectation of some kind of moral resolution which the novel goes some way towards realizing. This is consistent with the patterns of duality and conflict that give Dostoyevsky's novels their particular ambivalence and help create the tragedies of their characters as they are torn in contrary directions between the ideal they will not relinquish and the degradation that prevents them from achieving it.

Dostoyevsky frequently refers to these tensions in his novels,<sup>24</sup> while Bakhtin recognizes their importance in his theory of polyphony in which he makes a distinction between the "coexistence without confusion" of opposites in Dostoyevsky, and the sublimation of difference in Hegel, for example, where contrary forces in history are ultimately

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<sup>23</sup> 'Pourquoi j'aime Barthes', p258.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Mitya's comments on beauty in *The Brothers Karamazov*: "Beauty is a fearful and terrifying thing! [...] Here the shores meet, here all contradictions live side by side.[...] It makes me mad to think that a man of great heart and high intelligence should begin with the ideal of Madonna and end with the ideal of Sodom. [...] beauty is not only a terrible, but also a mysterious, thing. There God and the devil are fighting for mastery, and the battlefield is the heart of man". (pp123-124) Contrast this with Nietzsche's definition of beauty according to which conflict is overcome through the "will to power": "'Beauty' is for the artist something outside all orders of rank, because in beauty opposites are tamed; the highest sign of power, namely power over opposites [...]"'. *The Will to Power*, p422.



absorbed in the unity of Absolute Spirit. Significantly, some of the rationale behind Bakhtin's theory of polyphony derives from the Orthodox dogma of the trinity in which unity is represented as a community of difference, as distinct from a monologic and uniform totality. In so far as Dostoyevsky extends this basic notion of difference within unity (schisms in the one character, personal differences juxtaposed in a community), the semantic 'unity' within which contradiction operates in his novels could be described as already divided within, and even against, itself, and hence cannot be said to be centred on what Robbe-Grillet calls a "noyau de sens solide". Equally, the philosophic terms generated by this shifting framework in Dostoyevsky do not guarantee anchorage for textual instabilities and are, moreover, shattering in their effects on the psyche of Dostoyevsky's main characters.

This in itself shows the inadequacy of the view that thinking within a given belief-structure must always end in the affirmation of what Robbe-Grillet calls a "monde plein", "solide", and "rassurant". On the contrary, it is largely because of his much-debated allegiance to Christian thought that Dostoyevsky is able to "pervertir de l'intérieur", or, subvert and question terms of reference from within a given framework, a process which leaves that framework vulnerable.

In addition to these qualifications are reservations about some of the binary oppositions which support the case against contradiction. Barthes, for example, offers no alternative to authoritarianism, on the one hand, and anarchy, on the other, in *Le plaisir du texte*, while Robbe-Grillet often sets the slippages of meaning associated with "glissements" against the strawman of "la pensée conceptuelle", incapable of any dislocation from its "axe fixe". Modifying their case, however, is the parenthetical admission in Barthes, for example, that while the pleasure of the text "ne fait pas acceptation d'idéologie",<sup>25</sup> it still needs the shadow of ideology — "un peu d'idéologie, un peu de représentation, un peu de sujet"<sup>26</sup> — to give its subversive games meaning. So if ideology as an abstract and detailed totality is rejected, then the need for some kind of framework to think in (and undermine), and the inevitability of the subjects' having a particular perspective on the world, are both acknowledged. Robbe-Grillet qualifies the case for "glissements" more decisively when he argues that deviations in meaning have a greater impact when they come after a logical sequence.<sup>27</sup> In other words, while it may be desirable to free the text from black and white polarities the erasure of distinctions may also forfeit the qualities of ambivalence and uncertainty Robbe-Grillet values as a writer. Constant "glissements"

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<sup>25</sup> *Le plaisir du texte*, p52.

<sup>26</sup> p53.

<sup>27</sup> See 'Order and disorder in film and fiction', p15.

of meaning may herald the conservatism of predictable disruptions where what is wanted is that ongoing sense of the incalculable in the text as the reader is confronted by that which *almost* conforms to the rule, but not quite. Accordingly, in a 1982 colloquium, Robbe-Grillet seems to return to a quasi-dialectical understanding of contradiction when seeking for terms to describe the tensions he hopes to foster in his novels:

the fact that in the dialectic, thesis and antithesis are incompatible, that they are at odds with each other, is [...] essential [...] for literature is precisely the place where those struggles between incompatible poles take place. [The text is] the place, the site of this contradiction between irreconcilable things.<sup>28</sup>

Though the possibility of synthesis is still rejected, and with it the idea of subservience to ideology, the clash of opposites Robbe-Grillet outlines here is conceivable only against a background of coherent, and therefore ideological meaning, which is what Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and Robbe-Grillet's *La jalousie* in some measure provide. By ideological, however, I refer to ideology in the general sense of a framework for thought, a perspective on the world, rather than in the sense of an abstract body of knowledge that operates as a system, independently of what Jameson has called "the positing of the individual subject".<sup>29</sup> The distinction is helpful to a study of the novels although it is not one Robbe-Grillet makes in his essays. Robbe-Grillet, like Barthes, tends to define ideology as an inflexible totality or body of doctrine in which, "if a single point is contested, everything immediately collapses".<sup>30</sup>

In Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* and Robbe-Grillet's *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, however, contradictions are more likely to be "frappé d'insignifiance" in the manner envisaged by Barthes in his attack on traditional opposites. At the same time, these two texts reveal one of the more fundamental discrepancies in the anti-authoritarian impulses informing the refusal of contradiction. Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet's experiments with the laws of logic in these works seem to give weight to Nietzsche's elliptical comments on the deconstruction of opposites in art, which is, he claims:

the highest sign of power, namely power over opposites; moreover, without tension: — that violence is no longer needed; that everything follows, obeys, so

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<sup>28</sup> Robbe-Grillet in *Three Decades of the French New Novel*, p190.

<sup>29</sup> See p91 of Jameson's article 'Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism' for a helpful discussion of Althusser's distinction between existential and abstract knowledge, following the Marxian distinction between ideology and science.

<sup>30</sup> 'Order and disorder in film and fiction', p11.

easily and so pleasantly — that is what delights the artist's will to power.<sup>31</sup>

The "will to power" is a theme I wish to explore in my final chapter. But it is not inappropriate to begin my analysis of Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet's scepticism with a reminder of the ambiguity which characterizes the plea for freedom from authoritarian dogma.

### *Crime and Punishment*

#### II. i. Unity and fragmentation

The terms of the hero's dilemma in *Crime and Punishment* are clearly linked to an overall vision that informs, and to some extent unifies, all of Dostoyevsky's works, thus enabling Panichas to say of him that while he "may be contradictory", Dostoyevsky is "never confused".<sup>32</sup> One of the paradoxes of the novel, however, is that this unifying vision, which Panichas links to Dostoyevsky's spirituality, has the very opposite to a unifying effect on the mentality of the novel's main character. It could be argued that Raskolnikov murders to escape the polarity implicit in the knowledge of good and evil, only to expose himself to this conflict on a more fundamental level, as his own conscience and instinctive compassion battle it out with his desire for a freedom without limits. Although the sense of moral value is undermined, it continues to be problematic and can be neither dismissed nor assimilated by each successive fragmentation. If, then, the novel fails to achieve that particular "trouble métonymique" Barthes looks for in texts which refuse ideological definition it nonetheless records the impact of the confrontation between the law of the sacredness of life and Raskolnikov's thesis that "everything is in a man's own hands". (p20) An ethical vision confronts the symmetry of a private value-system, and neither emerges unscathed from the encounter.

One of the reasons for the dramatic tensions engendered by the ethical dimension of the novel is that this aspect of Dostoyevsky's thought is not, strictly speaking, conceived as a totality at all. "Divine truth and justice", as Dostoyevsky terms it, does not impose itself ineluctably on the consciousness of the characters any more than its imprint can be erased with impunity from their conscience. It is more appropriately defined as an ongoing experience of difference that opposes, in Raskolnikov's case, a desire for wholeness. Hence, Raskolnikov's ethical awareness in the novel concerns intermittent reminders of the divine other of Dostoyevsky's "truth and justice", and of the other who

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<sup>31</sup> *The Will to Power*, p422.

<sup>32</sup> *The Burden of Vision*, p9. The latter part of this remark was made by Joyce Carey.

is his neighbour, which constantly disrupt his attempt to take things into his "own hands". Since his determination to pursue this end persists in the face of weakness he is, in truth, "jeté sur un champ de bataille"<sup>33</sup> rather than positioned in an arena of negotiable difference.

Unexpected feelings of compassion, for example, prompt gestures that contradict Raskolnikov's Napoleonic ambitions and throw him off his chosen course. His impulsive gift of money to the Marmelodovs (p44) and his concern over Sonia as she walks the street (p66) are a source of particular annoyance, since they seem to spring from impulses that escape his rational control and assessment. ("What the hell made me interfere? Who am I to help her?") The fact that he is moved to tears over his mother's letter, the "small, slanting handwriting, so familiar and dear to him, of his mother who once taught him to read and write", (p47) further betrays the extent to which Raskolnikov feels bonded with others, despite the mood of cynical malice he assumes after reading the letter, perhaps in unconscious defence against this exasperating vulnerability. It is the deeply ingrained sense of his ties with his family that Raskolnikov finds he has betrayed when he murders the rapacious old moneylender, with her greasy hair "twisted into a rat's tail plait, and gathered up under what was left of a broken down horn comb, which stuck out at the nape of her neck". (p96) <sup>34</sup> When his mother and sister greet him after a long absence with a "rapturous cry", therefore, Raskolnikov "stood like one dead: a sudden, unbearable realization of what he had done struck him as though by lightning". (p212)

An experience of separation from others and of inner division, then, are the consequences of Raskolnikov's crime as "Insoluble questions arise" and he is, in Dostoevsky's words, tormented by "unsuspected and unexpected feelings".<sup>35</sup> Ironically this experience of disunity is the result of Raskolnikov's refusal to recognize difference in the form of the other of the law, and the other for whom the law makes him responsible. Soon after the murder Raskolnikov feels he is "losing his grip", (p95) experiences "disgust at what he had done", (p99) and is forced to concentrate his mind on trivia to protect himself from the shattering impact of the memory of what he has done. When Zossima, Rasumikhin and Nastasya begin to discuss the murder in his room (where he has physically

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<sup>33</sup> *Différence et répétition*, p74. Note Deleuze's distinction between the resolvable differences of "des malentendus" and the contradictions which remain "les luttes inexpiables".

<sup>34</sup> The sickening, nightmarish quality of this physical description of Alyona, observed just as Raskolnikov is about to bring down the axe, are also an instance of Dostoevsky's judicious use of detail to sharpen the focus of a scene or character and reflect his hero's state of mind. Such passages challenge Nabokov's sweeping criticism of Dostoevsky as being interested in his characters only as abstractions and not as particularized beings. (See *Lectures on Russian Literature*, p129.)

<sup>35</sup> In a letter to Mikhail Katkov, September 1865. *Dostoevsky Letters*, p175.

collapsed), he desperately focusses his attention on a "rather unshapely flower with brownish veins" on the wallpaper, examining "how many leaves it had and what kind of serrated edges and how many veins each little leaf had", in an effort to maintain self-control. (p153)

Yet if the crime generates violent schisms in Raskolnikov this does not mean he was single-minded before it, nor even that such untroubled personal integrity is an ideal from which he has fallen. For this reason I question the use of Hegel's concept of unity and difference in Zarader's analysis of *Crime and Punishment*. Hegel, explains Zarader, considers that the other "n'est que en réalité que le masque du Même, que la vie vivante n'est pas multiple mais une, et que l'on ne saurait tuer *une* vie mais seulement s'exclure de la vie [...]".<sup>36</sup> While there is undoubtedly a sense of organic linkage between characters, so that Raskolnikov wounds himself and his family in killing the old woman and her sister, Dostoyevsky's whole conception of unity and difference in the novel are, it seems to me, quite different from Hegel's. Raskolnikov's crime could be said to arise out of a failure to recognize the other always and already in *himself* as well as the other in the old woman. And the other he fails to recognize is not a unity in disguise as in Hegel (or in Zarader's reading of Hegel, as Zarader summarizes, "la vie est une avant de se particulariser dans des vivants distincts. Elle est la Mère primordiale [...] la totalité première dont l'individu n'est qu'un 'morcellement'"),<sup>37</sup> but an other which can never be reduced to sameness. Far from being an "axe fixe" that can only tremble without being shaken from its position of dominance, then, 'ideology' in the sense of an ethical awareness, is a source of schism and fragmentation in the novel that is activated as a result of the hero's attempts to impose his own unity on the world.

There are arguably two contrasting orders of unity and schism in the novel: the first, the ethical order and the contradictions this generates, the second the order associated with Raskolnikov's fixed idea about the Napoleonic superman. This last increases philosophical and psychological uncertainty as Raskolnikov questions the meaning of the ethical tension and worries over whether he will be strong enough to suppress it in the interests of carrying out his plan. Raskolnikov's plan principally involves the pawnbroker Alyona, whose murder is to be the first test of his worthiness to belong to the class of man who has the right to overstep the ethical law in pursuit of individual genius. As Nietzsche observes, the "highest sign of power" is "power over opposites", following which everything falls into place "so easily and pleasantly". So, in preparation for his act, Raskolnikov must do what he accuses his sister Dunya of doing in

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<sup>36</sup> 'La dialectique du crime et du châtement', p351.

<sup>37</sup> p355.

marrying Mr Luzhin: in other words, he must deliberately channel his thoughts to the one end, screening out everything that contradicts it, and so “persuade [himself] that there is no other way, that [he] really [has] to act like that for the sake of the good cause.” (p61) He follows the lead of the students in the café (““Well I have nothing against duty or conscience, but are you quite sure we know what these words mean?””), (p85) turning the words crime, duty and conscience over in his mind to the point where they lose their self-evidence and “there was [...] no danger of his reason or will-power being in any way affected during the carrying out of his plan, simply because what he intended to do was ‘not a crime’”. (p90) Yet in seeking to escape the restrictions imposed by the ethical dilemma, Raskolnikov transforms murder into a perverse form of ideology, in so far as it represents for him a definite course of action with a definitive meaning, which will supposedly lead to the sense of coherence and purpose more readily associated with the ethical element in the novel. The contradiction between conscience and lawlessness is thus temporarily displaced.

However, as Nietzsche has also observed, “One should beware of assessing the value of a man according to a single deed”.<sup>38</sup> The statement, taken by Kaufman as a reference to Dostoyevsky, certainly gains an ironic significance when applied to *Crime and Punishment*, as Raskolnikov discovers the act of murder does not define him beyond reach of change or contradiction. He is not thereby redeemed from the underground of speculation in which there is a Derridean “reciprocal contamination” of the terms of his dilemma (“What do duty and conscience mean?”, “Crime, what crime?”). But nor is he redeemed from the schisms created by his awareness of these terms, which, unlike Derrida’s, emerge intact after each dislocation, “coexisting without confusion”, in Bakhtin’s phrase, so that the agonizing process of ‘punishment’ revives all over again. It is from this disorder, provoked in part by an order of his own devising, that Raskolnikov eventually seeks respite, wanting, pleading almost, to be apprehended and sentenced: “Arrest me”, he begs Porfiry, “search me, but do it please according to the regulations and don’t play with me” (p364) Dostoyevsky’s contradictory hero thus seeks relief in an unthinking legal conformity that will not require his intellectual assent to the spirit of the law, as represented by the face of the other (and ultimately the divine Other) and its discomfiting demands.

## II. ii. “life” versus “dialectics”

Porfiry’s response to Raskolnikov draws the reader’s attention once again to the two sources of order and schism in the narrative — namely, the ethical and the speculative —

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<sup>38</sup> *The Will to Power*, p392.

and further makes some important qualifications regarding their nature. The significance of the first, it is implied, is borne in on Raskolnikov only as a result of his interaction with others, while the second grows out of, and is convincing only in, the underground of mental and social isolation. As Porfiry phrases it:

how much experience have you had of life and how much do you really understand? He's invented a theory, and now he's ashamed that it has proved a failure and turned out to be so very unoriginal [...] What you have long needed is a change of air [...] give yourself up to life without thinking. (p471)

Porfiry's advice also indicates the direction in which the narrative will be oriented in the final pages where conflict on the experiential and ethical level is to displace the doubts and contradictions of underground sophistry to which Raskolnikov, "a sceptic [...] fond of abstract reasoning", (p338) is so addicted. "Life" rather than an abstract ideology or moral code, is to take the place of "dialectics". (p558) The moral or spiritual vision that informs the novel is thus qualified and shown not to be an ideology in the way this is sometimes understood by Robbe-Grillet or Barthes, namely, as a coherent and totalitarian system. It has more to do with Dostoyevsky's perception that life's greatest problems and challenges, as well as life's true 'meaning' and 'value', arise out of the context of relationships. This is the "corrective of reality" that is "too *contradictory and heteroglot*" to be systematized, and of which Bakhtin writes in *The Dialogic Novel*. Or, as Bakhtin specifies elsewhere in a definition of the Dostoyevskyeian concept of 'worldview':

The truth about the world, according to Dostoevsky, is inseparable from the truth of personality [...] Therefore the loftier principles of *Weltanschauung* are the same as the principles of the most *concrete personal experience*.<sup>39</sup>

As Dostoyevsky demonstrates and Bakhtin attests, systems and theories about life can too easily become abstractions, "sums in arithmetic", that buckle under the strain of life's contingencies, or mask the realities of weakness and need. Raskolnikov could not foresee that he would be 'forced' to kill the meek Lizaveta as well as her sister, nor could his dreams of power meet the need for companionship, which first drove him to the tavern where he met Marmelodov, and later compelled him to seek out Sonia.

Dostoyevsky thus attempts to take the question of contradiction implicit in the title of the novel outside its philosophic context. In stressing the value of "life" over reasoning, and by making the consciousness of life's sanctity one of the indicators of Raskolnikov's

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<sup>39</sup> *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p63. Italics mine.

humanity, Dostoyevsky departs from the scepticism of some of the early Greeks and their Reformation followers (such as Montaigne), who insisted that human action should ultimately be governed by custom and convention. For the good, argued Diogenes Laertius, is unknowable, relative, and judgement must therefore be suspended about the nature of morality as well as about the nature of material things.<sup>40</sup> Dostoyevsky would argue that the good entails responsibility for one's neighbour, and, although this may be undemonstrable as a philosophic concept, he shows Raskolnikov's attempts to discredit it as casuistry that only experience of life and love — and not conformity to custom — can amend.

Dostoyevsky's apparent preference for life over dialectics in this novel also distinguishes his conception of contradiction and uncertainty from the Barthesian notion of "différence". Barthesian "différence", as defined in *Le plaisir du texte*, for example, belongs to the abstract and attractive domain of an aesthetics of pleasure. Of Sade's text, which is "hors de tout code puisqu'il invente continûment le sien propre et le sien seul", Barthes emphasizes that "il n'y a pas de conflits: rien que de triomphes".<sup>41</sup> Such endlessly pleasurable readjustments and manoeuvrings are, in a sense, what Raskolnikov, as a self-defined "aesthetic louse", engages in, playing about with the words "crime", "duty" and "conscience". But these things, too, are "hors de tout code", belonging to the domain of the "most concrete personal experience" that must be struggled with rather than simply relegated to the realm of philosophic undecidables.

### II. iii. The question of the resolution

Does the fact that the nature of the conflict in *Crime and Punishment* is nonetheless conservatively defined mean that the novel falls into the category of texts in which, as Deleuze phrases it, "la différence est le fond, mais seulement le fond pour la manifestation de l'identique"?<sup>42</sup> Is there, in other words, a resolution of the contradiction in the novels by virtue of the fact that the terms of the contradiction have been defined, as in crime/law, life/casuistry? As George Panichas observes:

Sin that in any form leads to internal suffering and to the slightest reactivation of conscience is never without hope of redemption.<sup>43</sup>

The moral terms in the narrative, however divided they leave the hero, would appear to ultimately invoke the hope of unity.

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<sup>40</sup> *Hellenistic Philosophy*, p85.

<sup>41</sup> *Le plaisir du texte*, p28.

<sup>42</sup> *Différence et répétition*, p74.

<sup>43</sup> *The Burden of Vision*, p15.



Yet it does not automatically follow that crime attended by suffering is a guarantee of redemption. Dostoyevsky's own comments on *Crime and Punishment* are potentially misleading in this regard, when he says that:

Divine truth and justice and the law are triumphant in the end, and the young man finishes up by giving himself up against his will.<sup>44</sup>

For the point is that although events in *Crime and Punishment* conspire to bring about this end — namely, the triumph of divine truth through repentance, confession and salvation — the young man who gives himself up against his will never gives up his will, and is thus always ready to take back any decision he may have made, even after having apparently accepted, once and for all, his need for atonement. He leans towards repentance with tears only to swing back with renewed defiance:

I won't go [i.e. to give himself up]. Perhaps I *am* a man and not a louse. I have been in too great a hurry to condemn myself. (p434)

Raskolnikov's final uncertainty does not necessarily constitute an evasion of the question either (as Magarshack seems to imply when he writes that Dostoevsky "dismisses [Raskolnikov's conversion] in a few words as being merely the subject of another novel").<sup>45</sup> Rather, Raskolnikov's conversion, which has at least been foreshadowed throughout the text, is finally phrased as a question, a question whose terms have been unequivocally defined, but a question for all that: "Is it possible that her convictions can be mine, too now?" (p558) *Crime and Punishment* shows the limits of the view that because a contradiction can be identified it ceases to be problematic. The opposite poles that qualify Raskolnikov's fate also leave it open. But if Dostoyevsky represents his hero as a theatre of contradiction in a manner inconsistent with Aristotle, he also represents the process of 'becoming' in which he is caught up as having certain consequences and results. The kind of indefinite deferral of meaning preferred by opponents of classical contradiction, and attempted to some measure by Raskolnikov, is thus undercut by a sense of ethical and existential urgency. It is perhaps the knowledge that his characters may ultimately prefer the dazzling convolutions of the intellect, the "crooked winding wayes, wherein [they] live, wherein [they] die, not live",<sup>46</sup> that constitutes the real "burden" of Dostoyevsky's spiritual vision.

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<sup>44</sup> Dostoyevsky, in the same 1865 letter referred to on p26, Magarshack's translation in the introduction to the novel, p13.

<sup>45</sup> p16. See, however, my defence of this idea in Chapter 5, pp206-207.

<sup>46</sup> From George Herbert's poem, 'A wreath'.

## *Notes from Underground*

### III. i. Contradiction as negation

Dostoyevsky's use of contradiction in the first part of *Notes from Underground* comes closer to the post-modern practice of difference than the contradictory tensions in *Crime and Punishment*. In the later novel, the motives of the main character remain obscure, but his prevarication does not negate the terms of his dilemma, nor does it dissolve all personal attributes in the morass of indecision. Raskolnikov's mercurial personality is the unity that is qualified, but not erased, by contradiction and can be seen as an illustration of Dmitri Karamazov's assessment of man as "too wide" to be defined and too dynamic to be a non-entity. In *Notes*, on the other hand, contradictions seem to sabotage a sense of personal identity altogether, leaving the reader empty-handed and the narrator without a face. For this reason the text comes closer than perhaps any other of Dostoyevsky's novels to Barthes' ideal of contradictions "frappés d'insignifiance" and to Robbe-Grillet's notion of contradictions functioning in relation to narrative lacunae. It is *Notes*, then, and not *Crime and Punishment* or even *The Devils*, which may be considered as the real New Novel *avant la lettre* in this respect.<sup>47</sup>

After setting up a particular thesis concerning his 'character', for example, —"I was a bad civil servant" (p15) — the underground man negates his statement, not in order to qualify an attribute or resolve a contradiction in logic, but to erase what he has said, forcing the reader to abandon any hypothesis she might have been formulating and to start the interpretative game again from degree zero:

I was lying just now that I was a bad [zloi]civil servant. I was lying out of spite[zlost] [...] in reality I never could make myself malevolent. I was always conscious of many elements showing the directly opposite tendency. [...] Not only couldn't I make myself malevolent, I couldn't make myself anything: neither good nor bad, neither scoundrel nor an honest man, neither a hero nor an insect. (p16)

Julia Annas questions Coulson's translation of the words *zloi/zlost* here, on the grounds that it has too definite a quality to adequately convey the negative import of the narrator's grievance.<sup>48</sup> Certainly, the effect of his reasoning leads to an undermining of

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<sup>47</sup> Stavrogin's confession is, more precisely, the portion of *The Devils* which Robbe-Grillet highlighted in the lecture 'Le vide comme générateur du texte'. For comment on this character see my Chapter 3, pp124-133.

<sup>48</sup> 'Action and character in Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*', pp267-268.

"humanness" as a concept which can be talked about coherently. In the manner of the sceptic who questions the validity of origins and causes and finds he is without foundation even for his own arguments, the underground man sets out to talk about himself and finds he has no self to talk about once he has created a sense of such acute mental vertigo:

Where are the primary causes on which I can take my stand, where are my foundations? Where am I to take them from? I practise thinking and consequently each of my primary causes pulls along another [...] what can I do if I don't even feel resentment? (This was my starting-point of a short time ago). My anger, in consequence of the damned laws of consciousness, is subject to chemical decomposition. As you look, its object vanishes into thin air, its reasons evaporate, the offender is nowhere to be found [...]. (p27)

This relentlessly destructive use of contradiction has something of the gleeful anarchy of certain passages in Barthes' *Plaisir du texte* where difference challenges the 'paternal' legalism of institutionalized knowledge beyond the possibility of dialogue to the "mort du Père", with: "Le plaisir en pièces; la langue en pièces; la culture en pièces [...] hors de toute finalité imaginable".<sup>49</sup> The Underground Man derives his own "strange pleasure" from the philosophical wasteland he has created, the shimmer of ideas which continue to fascinate without taking definite shape. Thus he sinks "voluptuously into inertia" reflecting that there is no one even "for [him] to be angry with". (pp22-23)

### III. ii. Contradiction and the revolt against limits

But Dostoyevsky's narrator is dissatisfied with the limitation implicit in negative certitudes and tires of the pleasures of textual sabotage. He seems to offer the reader a glimpse of something which both motivates his rejections of the laws of nature, science, and self-interest, and compels him, in turn, to deride those rejections as mere pettifoggery. For on one level the underground man's rejection of conventional rules of conduct is pure gratuitous display, Barthes's "plaisir du texte", practised with acidic zest. But on another, the gratuitousness in the display is shown to be the whole point of the exercise, signalling the beginnings of a definition of his humanity that must never be completed. In other words, Dostoyevsky's narrator wishes to defend his right to gratuitousness, his right to change and inconsistency, all of which make him a man and not a predictable machine or the "sprig on the cylinder of a barrel organ", as he puts it. (p34)

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<sup>49</sup> *Le plaisir du texte*, pp75 and 82 respectively.

Negation in *Notes from Underground* thus appears to function as a back-to-front admission of something positive, suggesting the existence of certain criteria motivating the narrator's protests. The problem of the criterion is the subject of my next chapter, but may be briefly defined here as the defence of an anarchic creativity which is preferred in the novella to the totalitarianism implicit in systematic thought. Systems, with their reliance on categorical definition, offer security. But they also impose limits. They familiarize, but they also enclose. In voicing reservations concerning philosophic and ideological systems Dostoyevsky's narrator joins forces with Derrida (*différance* "fomente la subversion de tout royaume"); Barthes (the pleasure of the text resists "toute finalité imaginable"), and Robbe-Grillet ("it is never a question of replacing the Tsar's statue by a statue of Stalin. It is a question of never placing any statue in position [...]").<sup>50</sup> All three contemporary writers, in their argument for difference over traditional contradiction, are concerned with the problem of intellectual constraints implicit in axiomatic thinking, and in this respect, all three could be said to share the underground man's refusal of a world where "everything will be so accurately plotted that there will no longer be any individual deeds or adventures left [...]". (p33) Systems and theories are inevitable, and even necessary, from a practical point of view. But, implies Dostoyevsky's underground anti-philosopher, they require constant qualification since their very ambition to explain and summarize, paralyzes the dynamism of the rational processes that initiated them. By negating one thing after another, Dostoyevsky's narrator seeks to withstand what he sees as the real minus sign of bleak determinism.

### III. iii. Contradiction as uncertainty

Does this circuitous affirmation through negation, then, represent the last reversal of meaning to be performed in the narrative? May it be viewed as the axis about which all the other contradictions turn and derive their meaning? In fact, true to the ironic tone of the novella, even the "free and unfettered volition" it seems safest for the reader to applaud, is mocked and shown to be unreliable as a 'foundation' for thought. For Dostoyevsky exposes the weakness and despotism inherent in the anti-institutionalism of his narrator, whereby a man may "always and everywhere [...] act as he chooses". (p33) This is partly brought about through a life versus dialectics opposition similar to the one developed in the novel *Crime and Punishment*. In the first part of the narrative, for example, the underground man's caprice goes unchallenged because his "doubts and agitations" are safe from the criticism and "caprice" of a second party. In the second part of the novella, however, where he records his forays into society, the grand tirades of

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<sup>50</sup> 'Order and disorder in film and fiction'. See my comments on this in relation to the problem of the criterion in Chapter 2, pp63-65.

the first part deflate, in retrospect, into a rhetoric of escapism and self-aggrandizement. Hence in Chapter 1 the underground man defies law and system. In Chapter 2, he notes how in company he "slavishly observed the ordinary conventions"; (p48) while his attempts to prove his independence of others' opinions of him — "I will sit and drink [...] and sing, if I want to, yes, sing" — fall pitifully flat. "But I didn't sing. I merely tried not to look at any of them. I put on the most independent air I could manage". (pp77-78) The narrator's determination to do as he pleases, therefore, and his sense of superiority to the "man of character" (who, he argues, is "essentially limited" in thought and action simply because he has a character), (p16) is qualified by the awareness of his own vulnerability, irrespective of his revolutionary philosophizing. His anarchic bravado is wounded by the "wretched inadequacy" and "unbearable humiliation" (p55) he falls prey to, despite his convictions, or lack of them.

Equally inconsistent with the affirmation of self-will, is the narrator's inability to grant others the freedom of definition he demands for himself. Hence, while insisting on the fluidity of his own personality, he applies inhibiting labels to others, calling one "a nasty insolent little braggart" and "abject little coward", and another, "an ordinary sort of person [...] kowtowing to every kind of success and incapable of discussing anything but promotion". (p64) The tendency to make exclusive value judgements of this sort is associated by Dostoyevsky's narrator (and his post-modern counterparts), with the guardians of philosophic and ideological systems. Dostoyevsky's narrator, however, demonstrates that the instinct to exclude and simplify in the promotion of one's own point of view may distort the most libertarian of impulses, turning even the desire for freedom into a power-game. The philosophic rebellion of the first part of the novella begins to look like a study in self-deception, as the show of strength exposes an underlying pettiness and narrowness of mind.

These "glissements" between freedom and determinism in Chapters 1 and 2 of *Notes* are arguably the key to the structure of the novella as a whole, which may then be seen to be constructed around a fundamental irony. This, to some extent, answers Julia Annas's criticism that the work, when considered in its entirety, lacks coherence:

Part I [...] is written by a man who embodies the condition he is talking about; part II is not. At the literary level one may conclude that Dostoyevsky has made his point [...] From the philosophic point of view, however, the transition is somewhat problematic.<sup>51</sup>

In the light of the decreased use of verbal contradictions in the second part and the

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<sup>51</sup> 'Action and Character in Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*', p271.

underground man's increased preoccupation with specific character traits as he comes into contact with other people, Annas suggests he may be acting out of envious imitation of the "normal" man he disparages in part one. He has, in other words, abandoned his unpredictable persona in the search for a face. Annas also considers the significance of certain passages excized from the original publication (containing a religious motif that would fit in with the narrator's stronger sense of personal need in the second section) as providing a possible clue to the novella's missing unity. But Annas finally dismisses these possibilities as unsatisfactory, concluding that:

All the same, if one interprets part I as illustrating, in the way it is written, a philosophic point basic to Dostoevsky's design, then it is hard to see the whole book as a unity.<sup>52</sup>

Yet if we accept, as Annas does, the central importance of the defence of inconsistency in part I, on the grounds that "if a man's desires can be predicted then they can be manipulated",<sup>53</sup> then surely it is vital to this whole principle to show that one individual's right to caprice may be contradicted and limited by another's least the latter become "no more than a piano key" for the former's tune. From using concentrated "glissements" of meaning on the level of the individual statement in Chapter 1, Dostoyevsky then goes on to employ a contrast in style and theme to effect a subversion of one part of the novella by the other, so as to problematize and enhance the overall theme of contradiction in relation to human unpredictability.

What finally emerges from a study of contradiction in *Notes* is the apprehension that all ideas and imaginings, even the most enticingly flexible, contain the seeds of their own mortality. The weapon with which the narrator sets out to oppose recognized forms of oppression reveals its doublesidedness. And it is perhaps the implicit recognition of the inescapability of limits, as well as the desirability of challenging them, that gives this contradictory discourse something of what Gide has called the "anxieuse complexité" of human experience.<sup>54</sup> For in the end we are as uncertain what to make of the narrator as he is himself, reader and narrator alike tantalized by unnameable shadows that both invite, and elude, expression. On p24 the narrator declares himself to be troubled by something he can never put a name to:

nobody knows what, nobody knows who, but in spite of all the mysteries and illusions, you ache with it all, and the more mysterious it is, the more you ache.

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<sup>52</sup> p273.

<sup>53</sup> p263.

<sup>54</sup> *Dostoïevsky*, p53.

This residue of unease, however, is shown to be unsatisfied either by wilful negation or by the theories the narrator sets out to discredit, remaining other to his discourse, haunting, beckoning and troubling him. Like Raskolnikov's crime, then, but without the hint of a resolution, the underground man's rhetoric is susceptible of different interpretations: it negates, it affirms, but also, it perpetrates a morass of doubt, longing and fear, fear of the other, and fear of his own underground also:

Although I have said that I am green with envy of the normal man, I wouldn't like to be him in the circumstances in which I see him (even though I shall not cease to envy him, all the same). No, no, the underground is better, in any case. There one can at least ... Ach! The fact is I'm lying even now! I'm lying, because I know, as sure as two and two make four, that it isn't the underground that is better but something different, entirely different, which I am eager for, but which I shall never find. Devil take the underground! (p43)

While considerably closer in philosophic terms than *Crime and Punishment* to the logic of "glissements", *Notes* nonetheless situates the problem of contradiction in an experiential context in which, irrespective of their philosophic validity, contradictions are symptoms of stress and malaise. The problem of definition is thus contingent on the problem of existence.

### *La jalousie*

#### IV. i. Contradictions and the "pleasure of the text"

Robbe-Grillet's *La jalousie* follows a similar pattern to *Notes from Underground* in that it uses contradictions on different levels in the narrative to both negate and to affirm. On one level, for example, contradictions relate to a capricious negativity that creates what Barthes has called a "silence of meaning" in the novel: in other words, both the object and the logic of contradiction are erased by a series of conflicting statements. On another level, however, a quality of intense suggestiveness shadows the descriptions in the narrative, provoking an ongoing, contradictory tension between surface and subjective readings, between silence and what could be called the discourse of jealous suspicion. Because of this duplicity in interpretation, and the atmosphere of manic uncertainty that results, the contemporary text could be said to offer its own version of the openended question that constitutes the "anxieuse complexité" of Dostoyevsky's *Notes*. *La jalousie* contradicts to erase, but in erasing, annihilates only habitual and complacent readings of a world whose strangeness may be disturbingly familiar, reminding readers of the fragility of their own hold on rationalizing discourse about 'reality'.

A recurrent example of conflicting statements which negate both the object and the

contradictions employed in its description begins with the temporal reference, “maintenant”, in the opening sentence. Time is an abstraction, not an object, but its coherence as a concept is sufficiently established in most Western minds to ensure that references to the present will be automatically related to a past and a future, and so on, in orderly succession. Initially, “maintenant” in *La jalousie* seems to be an indicator of just such a 24 hour time-scale, its first appearance coinciding with a reference to the sun being “haut dans le ciel”, (p9) while a later mention is coupled with a reference to lengthened shadows on the terrace and preparations for an evening meal, (pp15-16) suggestive of the end of the day. But successive entries erode this quality of banal chronology, as it becomes less obvious whether the time referred to comes after or before the previous sequence. As the time-frame of the novel grows increasingly complex, it emerges that “maintenant” refers to whatever moment is in question and, moreover, that all moments have the same value in so far as there is no normative reference point that would permit meaningful comparisons between them. Thus, when the young boy serving in the house is asked when he received an order from his mistress, his reply and the ensuing comment — “ ‘Maintenant’, ce qui ne fournit aucune indication satisfaisante” (p50) — is applicable to all the temporal references in the novel. “Maintenant” is not an unequivocal indicator of meaning so much as a refrain in a carefully orchestrated formal arrangement (note its successive appearances as a textual marker in the table of contents). Consequently, the contradictions and discrepancies that exist between its various appearances in the narrative are emptied of logical significance, or, as Barthes would phrase it, “frappé[s] d’insignifiance”.<sup>55</sup>

Perhaps the most blatant example of contradiction employed as a technique of erasure in *La jalousie* occurs in the mock résumé of the African novel A... and Franck have been discussing:

Le personnage principal du livre est un fonctionnaire des douanes. Le personnage n’est pas un fonctionnaire, mais un employé supérieur d’une vieille compagnie commerciale. Les affaires de cette compagnie sont mauvaises, elles évoluent rapidement vers l’escroquerie. Les affaires de la compagnie sont très bonnes. Le personnage principal — apprend-on — est malhonnête. Il est honnête, il essaie de rétablir une situation compromise par son prédécesseur, mort dans un accident de voiture. Mais il n’y a pas eu de prédécesseur, car la compagnie est de fondation toute récente; et ce n’était pas un accident. Il est d’ailleurs question d’un navire (un grand navire blanc) et non de voiture. (p216)

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<sup>55</sup> The same reasoning could be applied to the minor discrepancies concerning the numbering and position of the windows, for example, which Deneau notes, observing that “a few purposeless contradictions seem to have escaped the watchful eye” of the writer and are “the result either of carelessness or of downright perversity”. (‘Non-functional contradictions in Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy*, pp62-63)



After such a relentless cancelling out of opposites it seems impossible to derive any coherent information at all from the novel within the novel, and the reader is left, literally, with nothing.

It is significant, however, that the "silence de signification" which this passage so admirably demonstrates is related by Barthes in his discussion of Robbe-Grillet's "fameux objets" in the novel, to a *mise en valeur* of the text itself. In other words, the paring away of anecdotal and psychological interest, in this apparently devastating fashion, is "au profit d'un être-là du texte" (and not of "la chose"),<sup>56</sup> the construction and re-construction of sentences becoming the focus of attention once the readerly activities of deciphering and recognition have apparently been made redundant. If the résumé of the African novel is a rather circumscribed example of virtuoso experiment, other passages in *La jalousie* make clear the creative prerogative which informs Barthes' argument, and which, on occasions, gives the reader a role also in making something inventive of logical cul-de-sacs. In A... and Franck's discussion of the novel, contradictions have an obvious creative function as they are used to erase one hypothesis preparatory to the formation of another. Hence:

D'autres bifurcations possibles se présentent [...] qui conduisent toutes à des fins différentes. Les variantes sont très nombreuses; les variantes des variantes encore plus. Ils semblent même les multiplier à plaisir, échangeant des sourires, s'excitant au jeu, sans doute un peu grisés par cette prolifération. (p83)

This, then, is the process of erasure and invention that follows the pattern of Barthes' "plaisir du texte", in which contradictions are not conflictual or informative so much as indicative of a wayward proliferation of meaning that is (theoretically) without limit. It has something in common, too, with the "caprice [...] inflamed [...] to the point of madness" of Dostoyevsky's underground narrator, and is a confirmation of Robbe-Grillet's theoretical comment on the role of description in the contemporary novel, which is to negate, or contradict itself, in order to affirm its creative function:

[la description] affirme à présent sa fonction créatrice. Enfin elle faisait voir les choses et voilà qu'elle semble maintenant les détruire, comme si son acharnement à en discourir ne visait qu'à embrouiller les lignes, à les rendre incompréhensibles, à les faire disparaître totalement.<sup>57</sup>

#### IV. ii. The hypothesis of jealousy

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<sup>56</sup> See *Les romans de Robbe-Grillet*, p10.

<sup>57</sup> *Pour un nouveau roman*, p127.

But the kind of text that makes of every incongruity a creative opportunity is not as vulnerable to the spectre of incomprehensibility as a text which attempts to designate something specific. For in the latter case contradictions create genuine interpretative problems, while in the former case any hesitation can be incorporated into one of the bifurcations of the narrative which, not being bound by the need to represent can make a virtue of digression. The pleasure of the text is thus free of ideological or philosophical friction. As Barthes explains, after the erasure of conventional opposites, "il n'y a pas de conflits: rien que des triomphes".<sup>58</sup> To the extent that its bifurcations become normative it might also be added that the pleasure of the text excludes a certain kind of uncertainty.

This is where Robbe-Grillet's text does not perfectly conform to the Barthesian model, since the pleasure in verbal play in *La jalousie* is made additionally ambiguous by a suggestion of jealous suspicion which threatens the "silence of meaning" in the novel with the rhetoric of neurosis. Because the latter never declares itself unequivocally it can do no more than threaten the text with this extraneous burden of signification. Yet the threat of meaning is sufficiently powerful to create an ongoing interpretative conflict between surface and subjective readings that simultaneously revives the logic of contradiction undermined elsewhere in the narrative. The remark made by Robbe-Grillet at a recent colloquium, and cited in the introduction to this chapter,<sup>59</sup> acknowledges the continued relevance of contradiction in his novels, his conception of contradiction on this occasion seeming to approximate the idea of a dialectic, but without the possibility of a resolution:

the fact that in the dialectic, thesis and antithesis are incompatible, that they are at odds with each other, is [...] essential [...] for literature is precisely the place where those struggles between incompatible poles take place. [The text is] the place, the site of this contradiction between irreconcilable things.<sup>60</sup>

The novel, published more than 20 years prior to this remark, anticipates the theory in this regard.

Despite Robbe-Grillet's insistence here on the impossibility of resolving contradictions, it must be reiterated that such conflict as he envisages is only conceivable against a background of identifiable, coherent meaning which is anathema to the writer of *Le plaisir du texte*, and, to a lesser extent, to Robbe-Grillet himself, who once spoke of "l'ennemi du sens". Coherent meaning, as Barthes points out, is what permits us to draw

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<sup>58</sup> *Le plaisir du texte*, pp27-28.

<sup>59</sup> See p24.

<sup>60</sup> *Three Decades of the French New Novel*, p190.

the distinctions that may also turn out to be ideological battle-lines. As it is, systematic meaning in *La jalousie* makes significant inroads on textual contorsionism whose triumph, as a result, is no longer assured. A focus on certain repeated scenes and gestures, and an exaggerated concentration on A., and particularly on A... and Franck together, means that the proliferation of incongruous measurements and descriptive detail, which seem to underline the *être-là* of the text, are drawn into a frame of reference that is psychological as well as aesthetic. Things, it would seem, can mean as well as be in *La jalousie*.

The hypothesis of jealousy is established early in the narrative in the repeated suggestions of companionship between A... and Franck as reflected, for example, in their physical proximity on the terrace. Despite qualifying phrases like “sans doute” and “peut-être”, which prevent the hypothesis from developing into a statement of fact, the descriptions of the couple, taken in conjunction, are highly speculative. On p18 A... is said to have “*approchée le plus possible du fauteuil où est assis Franck*”, and the discreet exchange of words between them, though attributable to courteous pleasantries, is equally translatable into something more intimate; on p19 it is again noted that A... has arranged the chairs in such a way as to place herself and Franck next to each other; on p20 A... is observed listening attentively and encouragingly to Franck recounting his various (and surely tedious?) plans for, and difficulties with, the neighbouring plantation where he lives; A... asks for the lamp to be removed from the dinner table and Franck agrees that the general effect will be “*Plus intime bien sûr*”. (pp22-23) Such delicate hints, as innocuous as they are insinuating, are transposed into bold type when it is recorded on p30 that: “*L’espace entre la main gauche de A... et la main droite de Franck est de dix centimètres, environ*”. The *être-là* of the text is suddenly jolted out of alignment by another kind of preoccupation.

Responding to this lead, the reader may deduce the presence of a third party, someone who, like the reader, is confined to guesswork, but for whom the possible relationship between A... and Franck is of sufficient importance to warrant such minute attention. The implied observer who is seeing things from a particular visual perspective (and hence “*Ce coin de terrasse*”) (p10, italics mine) is presumably also seeing them from a particular psychological perspective, one that is identifiable with the experience of jealous suspicion. Once this suspicion has in turn taken hold of the reader’s mind, many of the objects and events of the narrative acquire a double shadow that mocks their anodine appearance, transforming it, momentarily, into evidence of a woman’s infidelity. The metamorphosis of neutral surfaces into “*pièces de conviction*” in this way creates an ongoing contradiction in interpretation comparable to the optical trickery in an Escher

etching in which, through near-imperceptible adjustments in linear detail, a fish becomes a bird, yet without immediately ceasing to be a fish. A “rapport louche” is generated between two different things which suggests that, contradictory tensions notwithstanding, Robbe-Grillet is still concerned to challenge the boundaries of Aristotelean contradiction in which no such cross-over, or confusion, of categories, is envisaged. The act of counting banana trees and measuring distances between objects, for example, can be interpreted both as a fascination with formal order and precision, and a form of therapy to counteract nameless fears, as was also seen in the way Raskolnikov concentrates his attention on a detail of the wallpaper to ward off the hysteria he fears will expose him to his friends. Using the terms Robbe-Grillet himself has provided in an essay on film and fiction, order in this instance *becomes* disorder, geometrical precision acting as mask and magnifying glass for obsessive passion.

To sustain this ongoing interpretative illusion Robbe-Grillet tends to employ his characteristic technique of “glissements”, which relies less on a clear-cut “struggle between incompatible poles” than on what Genette has likened to the Greek notion of “*semblablement-mais-différentement*”, where elements are presented both “*au contraire*” and “*de nouveau, de la même façon mais d’un autre point de vue [...]*”.<sup>61</sup> A... and Franck’s trip to town and the centipede incidents are both submitted to this theme and variations treatment, and this has the effect of intensifying the surface/suspicion tension at the same time as it undermines the foundations of interpretation altogether by failing to supply a definitive version with which variants can be compared (cf the temporal refrain, “maintenant”). The time of the trip to town changes from “la semaine prochaine” to the immediate ‘present’ where A... is seen getting out of the car with the opportunity of giving Franck a kiss, unobserved. The trip is then projected into the future, after which it becomes the subject of conversation as a past event, without any intervening causal links. The excursion is greeted by the narrator as a sensible idea for A..., whose usual means of getting to town is not particularly agreeable (“celle du camion chargé de bananes”), (p91) and suspected as an opportunity *par excellence* for sexual betrayal: a suspicion that seems to be confirmed when A... and Franck are described returning the next day, having spent the night in a hotel due to ‘engine’ trouble. In the course of all these narrative wanderings, however, it is not clear whether the trip to town ever takes place, or whether it is merely an anticipated and dreaded eventuality in the mind of a jealous third party.

The centipede incident similarly combusts in flights of fancy in the course of its numerous reappearances. The centipede is first referred to as a mere stain on the wall, then as a

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<sup>61</sup> ‘Vertige fixé’, p89. See footnote on same page.

large and live insect climbing the dining room wall. One version has Franck crushing the centipede with a table napkin, after which the insect falls to the tiled floor of the dining room; (p64) another has Franck killing an insect of enormous proportions, on an unidentified bedroom floor, with the aid of a bathroom towel. (p166) The latter is followed by a rapid succession of images overlapping one another: Franck's hand closing over a white sheet; a mosquito net around a bed; a faulty driving performance by Franck and a car accident; the burning of the wrecked vehicle (and its occupants?), the crackle of flames being transmuted into the rustling of the centipede's legs and the sound of a brush moving through A... 's hair. The whole reads both as a demonstration of textual dexterity and evidence of mounting passion from the perspective of a desiring and suspicious third party.

#### IV. iii. Jealousy: a fictional unity

It would seem, then, that despite the obliqueness of its signifiers, the experience of jealousy is established as a likely interpretative key by means of which the novel as a whole can be explained. This, at least, is what Morrisette and Leenhardt both seem to conclude in their readings of *La jalousie*. Morrisette, concentrating almost exclusively on jealousy in terms of the narrator's desire for A... summarizes the novel in his 1963 study as a psychological study of "le 'contenu mental' d'un narrateur jaloux [...]"<sup>62</sup> Hence:

la succession des scènes dans l'esprit du narrateur n'est ambiguë que superficiellement; si lui-même ne se rend pas compte de la nécessité qui relie les scènes qu'il subit, il obéit cependant, en les accueillant en tel ou tel ordre, à des règles psychologiques implicites, mais nettes.<sup>63</sup>

Leenhardt argues even more forcefully than Morrisette for the semantic and ideological coherence of the work, suggesting that:

tous les éléments de signification, à tous les niveaux, s'ordonnent au point de produire une signification globale qui les contient et les rend intelligibles.<sup>64</sup>

For Leenhardt this global signification concerns not so much the exclusively sexual passion of a third party as the distress of a Western imperialist ("angoisse des blancs confinés en leur refuge"),<sup>65</sup> losing control of a world he has sought to dominate.

Although a comment by Robbe-Grillet in 1976 suggests the two readings are vastly

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<sup>62</sup> *Les romans de Robbe-Grillet*, p114.

<sup>63</sup> pp125-126.

<sup>64</sup> *Lecture politique des romans de Robbe-Grillet*, p24.

<sup>65</sup> p25.

different,<sup>66</sup> Morrisette and Leenhardt's analyses equally hinge upon the narrator's (jealous) state of mind, incorporating in a similar fashion the double vision that such a state of mind would induce. The psychological experience of jealousy that Morrisette stresses is acknowledged by Leenhardt, but integrated into a wider psycho-sociological picture in which the desire for possession is inscribed in intellectual and territorial, as well as sexual, attitudes. In either case the results are a double-edged discourse that indicates at once a neurotic insecurity and a fastidious love of order. As Leenhardt elaborates: "Tout le problème de la vision du narrateur est de mettre de l'ordre là où le désordre lui paraît contenir une menace liée à l'incertitude".<sup>67</sup> This tallies with Robbe-Grillet's own exposition of the dual influence of order and disorder in the novel, implying that although Robbe-Grillet is uneasy with some of the terminology used in Leenhardt's analysis, the discrepancies between this reading and his own critique of the novel are not as dramatic as might be supposed. The common denominator in interpretation suggests a high degree of semantic coherence in a work that, as Robbe-Grillet humorously records, was initially judged impossibly fragmented by the critics.<sup>68</sup>

Robbe-Grillet's real objection to Morrisette's and Leenhardt's readings, however, has to do with the degree of recuperation such readings seem to make possible, with the reductionism that is thus involved for a work of literature, and with the inevitable loss of that quality of uncertainty Robbe-Grillet values in writing. As a result of Morrisette's and Leenhardt's labours, "The book", Robbe-Grillet points out, "became readable; it was subject to recuperation [...] and at the same time it was to a certain extent destroyed".<sup>69</sup> Yet these protests, if understandable, are unnecessary, since the text itself ensures that such a recuperation is never completely realizable, always remaining, despite its plausibility, in a state of suspension. This is not to say that Morrisette's and Leenhardt's readings are irrelevant to the preoccupations of Robbe-Grillet's text. On the contrary. It is simply that neither critic has sufficiently stressed the role of discontinuities in the narrative and the way in which this results in the whole fabric of *La jalousie* being constructed around an illusion.

The title, of course, contains its own punning reference (which Robbe-Grillet insists was not deliberate at the time), to the relationship between broken vision and speculation. What cannot be seen must be imagined, and thus a significant link is forged between the "jalousie" of the venetian blind and the "jalousie" of obsessive suspicion. The novel as a whole goes on to confirm this idea: namely, that because it is composed entirely of

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<sup>66</sup> See 'Order and disorder in film and fiction' (published 1977), p17.

<sup>67</sup> *Lecture politique des romans de Robbe-Grillet*, pp112-113.

<sup>68</sup> 'Order and disorder in film and fiction', p3.

<sup>69</sup> p17.

fragments there can be no 'proper' or 'true' method of assemblage for the narrative. The narrator looks out of the window at "les éléments d'un paysage discontinu"; (p51) his partial view of A... permits him to see only "le haut de la chevelure noire", (p52) or "le profil gauche du visage"; (p66) obstructed vision of Franck's car disallows verification of loverlike behaviour from A.. when she says goodbye through the window. The hotel bedroom where A.. and Franck have supposedly spent the night, on the understanding that they have, in fact, left for town in the first place, is, of necessity, out of sight altogether, and hence jealous suspicion at this point in the narrative reaches its maximum degree of intensity (see pp 166-167).

But there is never anything like real evidence that would justify this suspicion, as opposed to merely making it seem plausible. In this respect, the novel perfectly illustrates the dilemma of sceptics from Pyrrho right through to Montaigne, Pascal and present-day sceptics, which is that parts without the whole are open to misinterpretation. The addition of 'new' information can entirely alter the composition of a picture, however painstakingly the former has been assembled to reflect the 'facts' as known or surmized. At any moment schemes and systems may be cast aside, or modified, when the problem they are designed to address proves to be quite different from the way it was initially conceived. *La jalousie* merely reflects, with rare and manic consistency, the philosophical openendedness that attends the realization of the phenomenon of incompleteness, and it does so even when it indulges in the most blatant manoeuvres to close the gaps. Jealousy convincingly facilitates the "tissage" of narrative fragments, providing the kind of semantic unity in which contradictions and doubleness can be seen to operate. But the unity of jealousy remains a demonstrably fictional one, so that meaning in the novel is as threatened by silence as silence is by meaning.

One passage that betrays the text's foreknowledge of the delicacy of its own balance between silence and signification is the description of A... looking out the window:

Elle dit 'Bonjour', du ton enjoué de quelqu'un qui a bien dormi et se réveille d'agréable humeur; ou de quelqu'un, du moins, qui préfère ne pas montrer ses préoccupations — s'il en a — et arbore, par principe, toujours le même sourire; le même sourire où se lit, aussi bien, la dérision que la confiance, ou l'absence totale de sentiments. (p42)

Phrases such as, "s'il en a", and, "l'absence totale de sentiments", are sufficient to indicate that while A... may be guilty or innocent, the whole question of her guilt or innocence, and with it the contradictory tensions in the narrative, may themselves be utterly gratuitous. Nietzsche puts the philosophic distinction such a text ultimately reflects very nicely: "We need 'unities' in order to be able to reckon: that does not mean we

must suppose that such unities exist".<sup>70</sup> Barthes echoes this thought in more poetic vein at the end of his preface to Morrisette's essays,<sup>71</sup> and Robbe-Grillet rephrases it in the 1986 lecture, where he suggested a relation between contradictions and a void at the heart of the narrative. Because contradictions require meaningful patterns for their disruptions in the narrative to be appreciated, there is no guarantee that the meaningful patterns are any less arbitrary than the disruptions themselves.

In *La jalousie*, therefore, Robbe-Grillet revives the logic of opposites with its reliance on a controlling term, or foundation, at the same time as he exposes the fictionality of that controlling term, and hence the instability of the whole network of perceptions which it makes possible: a truly sceptical manoeuvre.

### *Projet pour une révolution à New York*

#### V. i. The spoof on contradiction: critical concern or philosophic indifference?

*Projet pour une révolution à New York* contains several allusions to the law of contradiction it rejects, although the purpose of these allusions is obscure, if indeed they have any purpose beyond the affirmation of textual caprice, and the suggestion of a particular kind of meaningfulness the text has no intention of fulfilling. One overt reference to contradiction occurs in the pseudo-revolutionary meeting described on p38, where the subject of discussion is what Morrisette has called the "burlesque Hegelian trinity"<sup>72</sup> in the novel:

Le thème de la leçon du jour paraît être 'la couleur rouge' envisagée comme solution radicale à l'irréductible antagonisme entre le noir et le blanc.

A second allusion to contradiction features in the semi-philosophic discussion between JR and her executioner:

Supposons que vous affirmiez d'abord une chose, puis son contraire; l'ensemble des deux réponses comporte alors à coup sûr l'expression de la vérité dans la moitié des cas. A partir de cette certitude, tout le reste n'est plus qu'une question de calculs mathématiques, exécutés par le cerveau électronique auquel on soumettra votre déposition. (p103)

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<sup>70</sup> *The Will to Power*, p358.

<sup>71</sup> For an allegorical image for the suspension of meaning in Robbe-Grillet Barthes refers the reader to the statues of Charles III and his wife in Robbe-Grillet's *Mariénbad*, who are pointing out "d'une façon certaine un objet incertain [...] ceci, disent-ils. Mais quoi, ceci? Toute la littérature est peut-être dans cet anaphorique léger qui tout à la fois désigne et se tait." *Les romans de Robbe-Grillet*, p16.

<sup>72</sup> Bruce Morrisette, *The Novels of Robbe-Grillet*, p266.



The first of these passages could be read as a reflection on the novel's predominant theme of violence which is advanced as the ironical solution, not so much to racial tension between black and white (which does not feature in the novel), as to the imperatives of black and white thinking, and so to the whole apparatus of chronology and causality against which the novel is manifestly in revolt. More particularly, *Projet*'s logical and verbal irregularities (or formal 'violence'), its incendiaries and sadoerotics (thematic violence) could arguably be represented as displacing the well-ordered niceties of conventional thinking about the world.<sup>73</sup> This is one way of interpreting the passage which, however, contains no real indication of its thematic or symbolic significance. A similar lack of conviction must attend attempts to translate the second passage into a philosophic or aesthetic statement. The invitation to interpret is there but in taking it up the reader is forced to import with it something extraneous to the text in a way readers of *La jalousie* are not.

One could speculate, for example, whether the reduction of contradiction to an expression of mathematical probability ("l'ensemble des deux réponses complète alors [...] l'expression de la vérité dans la moitié des cas"), contains a humorous criticism of the rational confidence underlying Aristotelean (or Hegelian) contradiction. Classical contradiction would thus be judged a fake dilemma that merely involves a more indirect, but nonetheless sure, route to "la vérité". If this were the case, one would expect the implied criticism to lead to the formulation in the novel of an alternative form of reasoning, more fitted to generating the uncertainties Robbe-Grillet values as a writer. As I hope to show the novel is indeed constructed according to its own 'alternative' logic. But whether this is more ambiguous in its results than the conventional logic it displaces is unclear. Equally unclear is whether Robbe-Grillet is at all concerned with sceptical questions of representation and interpretation in the novel. The passages cited above are just as likely to be what they seem on the 'surface', in other words jokes calling for a particular sense of humour, as in the case of the latter reference where the juxtaposition of pseudo-philosophic discussion with physical torture results in mutual mockery. This tends to confirm the function of the text as a 'pleasure'-ground rather than an arena for philosophic debate or existential comment.

Focussing on the problem of contradiction in this way highlights one of the ongoing difficulties of interpreting Robbe-Grillet, especially when there is, in addition, an attempt to identify him with a philosophical position — even one as speculative and

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<sup>73</sup> The violence of "parole" in collision — or collusion — with the writing of "langue"? See my comments on "langue" and "parole" in *Projet pour une révolution à New York* in Chapter 2, 'The problem of the criterion', pp83-90.

hypothetical as the sceptical position is thought to be. Flippancy, deliberate superficiality, and what sometimes reads as a naïve desire to shock (or titivate) must be weighed against the author's repeated insistence that his novels are not simply games or escapist fantasies but provocative and critical commentaries on contemporary experience.<sup>74</sup> Is Robbe-Grillet to be taken seriously philosophically, ideologically? Or is he too concerned to foil attempts to interpret and 'make sense' of his novels because of the danger of reductionism involved? The two aims are not incompatible but they do not necessarily go together in the narrative of Robbe-Grillet's *Projet*.

#### V. ii. "le passage du mur des contraires": the associative logic of "glissements"

The kinds of irregularities that characterize the narrative of *Projet* have to do with the small adjustments in the detail of a repeated scene or image that occur with some frequency in *La jalousie*. In the later novel, however, "glissements" are used almost exclusively as the means by which the narrative proceeds from one thing to another. This method of presentation has chiefly to do with the fading of one thing into another — as opposed to the interlocking extremities of 'order' and 'disorder' in *La jalousie* — and a form of associative logic commonly associated with poetic or oneiric discourse. Both these aspects of the technique call for a degree of agility in their following through, but, strictly speaking, neither produces a logical impossibility or contradiction since excessive use of the technique means there is no logical norm in the novel with which the perpetual dislocation of images can be contrasted. Chaos thus becomes normative, creating an atmosphere in which the reader is ready to be surprised by everything, and nothing.

One of the more noticeable ways in which the logic of "glissements" establishes itself in *Projet* is in the fading of one narrative voice into another, ensuring that no one perspective dominates but also that none of the narrative voices assumes a distinctive character. The resultant burgeoning of different narratives creates the impression of continual movement, even though the direction of this movement is constantly diverted so none of the 'stories' in the novel is ever 'finished'. Due to the intermittent use of names, it is possible to partially unravel this narrative enmeshing into various entities, although these are too changeable to function as 'characters' in the usual sense. The anonymous 'je', for example,

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<sup>74</sup> Robbe-Grillet's reactions to accusations of escapist fantasizing are as forthright as his responses to heavily meaningful analyses of his work: "justement le nouveau romancier est celui qui a choisi de parler le monde, donc exactement le contraire de se refermer sur soi-même bien à l'abri. [...] Notre parole ludique n'est pas faite pour nous protéger [...] mais au contraire pour nous mettre en question nous-mêmes et ce monde, et par conséquent le transformer." *Nouveau roman: hier, aujourd'hui*, pp95 and 97. See my comments on this in the following chapter, pp63-65.

on pp7-15 could be identified as a primary narrative voice who takes on the ambivalent character of Laura's brother-lover-assailant. The narrative quickly switches from his perspective to Laura's, to the voice of an impersonal interrogator, from the 'je' narrator again watching his pursuers, to them watching him. The 'je' narrative is then taken over by Laura watching the chase out the window, until Laura is displaced by JR. Because these switches are carried out without the usual indicators of personal difference the impression is one of an almost seamless, formal perfection. The whole process is neatly encapsulated, in *mise-en-abyme* fashion, in the description of the pseudo-revolutionary meeting where three people conduct a ritualized discussion, and are said to exchange "leur rôle par une permutation circulaire à chaque articulation du texte". (p100)

The pattern of overlapping narrative voices, in which one voice seems to grow organically out of the previous one, is repeated in the way action is developed in the novel. Just as there are no clear divisions between voices, nor is there any abrupt division between the narrative as conjecture and the narrative as physical action. For example, the narrative adopts a conjectural tone on p14, where attention is focussed on the zigzagging of the fire-escape on the outside wall of the buildings. The reflection that these would provide an ideal means of access for burglars and assassins is then crystallized in the mind of Laura — "C'est du moins ce que pense Laura" — before triggering a series of action shots in an experimental playing out of the mental hypothesis ("Le bruit du carreau brisé dont les éclats tintent en retombant sur le dallage, au bout du couloir, l'a réveillée en sursaut"). (p15)

Conjecture generates action, outside becomes inside, pursuer pursued, and, later in the narrative, white hands peel off to reveal black skin, masks uncover faces or other masks, as Aristotle's categories are submerged in the continual upheaval of 'becoming'. But the sense of instability created by the realization that nothing ever remains the same, and may metamorphose into something (or someone) else is counterbalanced in the novel by the logic of association that governs the process of "glissements" in Robbe-Grillet. The changes of scene and narrative voice may seem erratic but they are, in fact, marked by a strong sense of continuity as something from each image is carried over associatively into the next. The close inspection of a varnished door, for example, with which the narrative opens, triggers an erotic scene as curves in the wood-grain suggest the contours of a woman's body. A few pages later, the imagination wanders, by association, from the outside to the inside of a building and back again. A small steel key that might have been left behind (but has not been) is pictured lying on some appropriate surface, suggesting, by inference, the existence of a marble-topped console just inside the vestibule. The thought is sufficient to produce the object ("Il y a donc une console dans cet obscur

vestibule”), (p12) and to translate the narrator, as is the fashion in dreams, to the place with which his mind is occupied.

### V. iii. “Glissements”: absence or intensification of interpretative dilemmas?

The principle question, as far as the present discussion is concerned, is whether the logic of “glissements” displacing the more conventional forms of contradiction in the novel finally produces a higher degree of ambiguity. What is the text’s capacity, for example, to generate the double meanings and interpretations — “les oppositions insolubles, les éclatements, les apories diégétiques, les cassures, les vides” — defended by Robbe-Grillet in essays and other writings and which are theoretically linked to his sceptical bias? It has already been established that there is no structure of opposition, insoluble or otherwise, in the novel. This makes *Projet* a closer approximation of what Barthes calls “jouissance” than the earlier *La jalousie*. For, as Barthes explains, the text which has freed itself from the law of contradiction also evades the possibility of conflict:

Le texte n’est jamais un ‘dialogue’: aucun risque de feinte, d’agression, de chantage, aucune rivalité d’idiolectes; il [...] manifeste la nature asociale du plaisir [...], fait entrevoir la vérité scandaleuse de la jouissance: qu’elle pourrait bien être, tout imaginaire de parole étant aboli, *neutre*.<sup>75</sup>

The question is whether this absence of “rivalités d’idéolécetes” also lessens the sense of uncertainty communicable by the text? Can what is “neutral” provoke interpretative dilemmas, as opposed to vague feelings of readerly bewilderment?

In so far as the objects and events in the narrative lack the ambivalent quality which provokes readers of *La jalousie* to see double, the response would seem to be in the negative. The colliding discourses of geometry and desire from the earlier novel work together in easy harmony in *Projet*, producing a fastidious (but violent) eroticism, in which logical discrepancies have more to do with the finer details of bodily posture than with the introduction of material for different interpretative possibilities (See for example pp8 and 9 in this regard: “le seul détail indiscutable est la bouche généreusement ouverte, dans un long cri de souffrance ou de terreur. [...] la bouche, en effet, qui conserve trop longtemps la même position grande ouverte, doit plutôt se trouver distendue par une sorte de baillon: quelque pièce de lingerie noire fourrée de force entre les lèvres.”)

Equally restrictive on the level of ambiguity sustainable in the text is the very changeability that appears one of the novel’s more ‘revolutionary’ aspects. There is a

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<sup>75</sup> *Le plaisir du texte*, p28.

sense, in other words, in which the constant use of metamorphosis in narrative and scene-changes is self-defeating, since it potentially creates a high degree of complacency in the reader: change is what the text conditions the reader to expect. Or, in a deformation of Husserl's phrase, "if there are always changes, there are no longer any changes".<sup>76</sup> The text thus demonstrates the problem Robbe-Grillet once identified concerning the importance of establishing identifiable coded patterns as a background to, and means of highlighting, deviations. This is something information theorists have argued, and Robbe-Grillet has recognized the difficulty and summarized it accordingly:

The information theorists have discovered that it is necessary that the redundant elements be sufficiently important, sufficiently numerous, so that we not attribute to noise what was truly an element of communication, a piece of information.

He goes on to stipulate that:

the length of the fragments is extremely important, for at the opposite end you have the experiments of certain groups — the Tel Quel group, for example — in which the ideological fragments are so small that in the time that they last one does not recognize them. One then falls into the other danger of completely escaping from the world as if one were outside of society, outside of ideology, as if the revolution were already accomplished.<sup>77</sup>

It could be argued that while the different fragments in *Projet* are recognizable, their length is insufficient to throw into relief the formal modifications which occur. Apart from any prior models the reader may retain in her mind concerning literary norms, the novel in itself provides what appears to be an exaggeratedly obscure coded horizon (from the formal point of view), against which its deviations are to be appreciated. Compounding this problem is the fact that despite all the formal changes which produce a sense of movement in the text, the narrative preoccupation with sado-erotics tends to empty these formal changes of much of their impact. From the ideological point of view, which I wish to explore more fully in the following chapter, the text is conservative. Ilona Leki's comments on the novel's challenge to humanism seem to me to ascribe a bogus meaningfulness to a text that is, in this respect, unashamedly "neutre" and, in the

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<sup>76</sup> Cited by Claude Perruchet at the 1975 Cérisy colloquium: "S'il n'y a que des profils, il n'y a plus de profils". (p42)

<sup>77</sup> 'Order and disorder in film and fiction', pp15 and 16 respectively. cf Renato Barilli's comments in *Alain Robbe-Grillet: analyse, théorie*, p442: "Le modèle de l'absence ou de la différence doit se défendre de deux risques opposés: d'une part le danger de recouvrer l'unité, la totalité et, d'autre part, le danger de la pulvérisation. [...] Il faut se placer à l'intérieur des deux pôles, d'un côté le bruit et de l'autre côté la redondance". Barilli expresses similar reservations about the practice of "différence/différance" to Julia Kristeva. See my footnote to this effect, p53.

Barthesian sense, "asocial". Thus, with reference to its logical and formal fragmentations, and in its treatment of the pornographic code which represents the level of its socio-ideological engagement, *Projet pour une révolution à New York* is less revolutionary than its title might suggest. The structure of "glissements" in *Projet* fragments the narrative to a point beyond conventional contradiction but at the expense of a certain level of reader/text engagement also, leaving the reader with only a very limited space in which to imitate its manoeuvres. *Projet* is therefore, to my mind, less ambivalent than *La jalousie*.

## VI. Conclusion

Both Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet could be said to provide a critique in their novels of the simplifying categories that potentially underscore contradiction and binary opposition. The unsettling of rationalizing formulae in their works is concurrent with the shifting moods and perspectives of mental worlds that are unpredictable and perillous without the controls of fixed definitions. Neither narrator nor reader can easily orient themselves in such a world.

However, if a certain quality of uncertainty characterizes all four novels, the nature of the framework in which this uncertainty operates varies considerably. In Dostoyevsky, the opposition between the law and its transgression acquires all the force of an ethical and spiritual imperative over and above its legal definition. Contrary to what might be expected, however, the fixed points of the novel's mental compass tend to exacerbate rather than regulate the agonized reflections of the novel's hero, who relinquishes neither term of the contradiction that divides him. The torments Raskolnikov suffers would appear to confirm Barthes' objections to the murderous authoritarianism of binary logic, although Raskolnikov's plunge into the bliss of moral (and philosophic) anarchy also leads, literally, to murder, as he attempts to ratify his own authority.

In Robbe-Grillet's *La jalousie* the narrator's struggle to impose his own logical order on the environment, and to tabulate the movements of A... within that environment, are also undermined from within; in this case, by his own imagination and jealous desire. An ongoing exchange is created between contrary impulses which is never finally resolved. As in *Crime and Punishment*, the result of oppositional tensions is one of acute mental and emotional instability, although the terms of the opposition in *La jalousie* are shown quite pointedly to be illusory.

Dostoyevsky's *Notes* and Robbe-Grillet's *Projet* seem to occupy the other end of the

philosophic spectrum to *Crime and Punishment* and *La jalousie* in their use of contradiction. Instead of the creation of tensions between irreconcilable things, engaging the characters in a frantic wavering between one thing and another, *Notes* and *Projet* involve a more radical dismantling of the logic of identity and difference. A near manic readiness to negate, however, nudges both texts in the direction of nihilism, or, what Kristeva in her critique of Derrida's practice of *différance* has called, "un irrationalisme atomiseur".<sup>78</sup> In other words, the link between contradictions and erasure in these texts at some point implicates a break with the process of critical reformulation, whereby categories may be rephrased as well as challenged. The latter kind of flexibility involves a readiness to rethink and suspend judgement rather than to abandon speculative inquiry.

Part of the impulse to contradict in order to erase is, of course, related to the specifically literary, imaginative nature of the texts in question. By flagrantly rejecting conventional patterns of meaningfulness Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet's narrators are also confirming the priority of caprice over argument and reasonableness — a priority which reveals the nature of their criteria as novelists rather than as philosophers. This is a point I wish to develop in my next chapter. The interesting thing, however, is that while they show the rejection of formulae as a creative prerogative, the texts in question also demonstrate that the too eager espousal of the truth-that-there-is-no-truth maxim may lead to the stuffy mental atmosphere of Dostoyevsky's underground narrative, as despotic and exclusive in its way as the most rigidly systematic of philosophic discourses. In Robbe-Grillet's *Projet* a similar outcome may be inferred from the repetitious nature of his narrators' fantasies and the predictable patterns of the latter's disruption.

The novels of Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet examined here do more than provide a critique of what might be termed the academic, philosophic convention of contradiction. They also dramatize the potential limitations involved in the move away from contradiction, and the consequent loss of ambivalence once the logical colour wheel is spun too fast. The endless formulation of contradictions is as much a two-edged sword in post-modernist hands as it was in the hands of the early sceptics who, being "brought to a point where [they] cease to dogmatize" were at the same time brought closer to the point where they cease to inquire.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> *La révolution du langage poétique*, p80. cf Kristeva's criticism of Derrida's "différance" on similar grounds, p131, and her discussion of scepticism and the avant-garde in the section entitled 'Scepticisme et nihilisme selon Hegel et dans le texte' in the same work, pp163-171.

<sup>79</sup> One conclusion that can be drawn from Pyrrho's views on the impossibility of knowledge is that "speculation about the world" is "a time-wasting source of anxiety". See David Sedley, 'The protagonists', in *Doubt and Dogmatism*, p10.

## 2 The problem of the criterion

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What Hume's "Pyrrhonian illumination" has shown was that there was no Archimedean point outside common life from which it can be either certified or criticized. This [...] is the same point currently being made under the banner of "postmodernism". [...] Each opposes the quest of Western philosophy for a metanarrative, a foundation [...] and each has been criticized for eliminating the possibility of rationally grounded critique. (David Hiley)

### 1.1. The problem stated: Pyrrhonism and post-structuralism. Criteria "under erasure"

The sceptic, as defined by Sextus Empiricus, suspends judgement as a result of conflicting arguments, none of which, however, "can take precedence over another on grounds of its being more credible".<sup>1</sup> In other words there are no criteria for justifying a preference for a particular belief or point of view. Yet in spite of this, the Greek sceptic systematically opposes the philosophic doctrines of his age, formulating, after Aenesidemus, ten modes of procedure for critical negation.<sup>2</sup> Re-enacting this ancient paradox is post-structuralist Jacques Derrida, who denies the power of any "unique word" to validate a system of reference while using his own signature words, "différance", "écriture", to invalidate concepts like speech and writing, activity and passivity, cause and effect.<sup>3</sup> Both Pyrrhonian scepticism and the post-structuralist theory some see as its contemporary equivalent thus appear to be engaged in refutation without the grounds for doing so. And in so far as rigorous critical activity is accompanied by a reluctance to formulate a basis for criticism, the latter appears to be motivated by the indiscriminate denials of negative dogmatism.

Sextus Empiricus and Jacques Derrida would refute such reductionism, just as they would reject the charge of nihilism. In the first chapter of his work on scepticism, Sextus makes a point of distinguishing between the dogmatists, who "claim to have discovered the truth", the negative dogmatists, who "declare that finding it is an impossibility", and the sceptics, who "go on searching".<sup>4</sup> If, then, full assent and denial are withheld, this evidently does not prevent the sceptic from exploring phenomena and advancing hypotheses on how things appear to him ("[...] we do not make any positive assertion

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<sup>1</sup> *Sextus Empiricus. Selections from the Major Writings*, p34.

<sup>2</sup> See *Selections from the Major Writings*, pp42-87.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, 'La différence' in *Marges de le philosophie* and '...Ce dangereux supplément...' of the second part of *De la grammatologie* on the activity of writing.

<sup>4</sup> *Sextus Empiricus. Selections from the Major Writings*, p31.



that anything we shall say is wholly as we affirm it to be. We merely report accurately on each thing as our impressions of it are at the moment").<sup>5</sup> At the same time, however, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* contains a reminder of the scope and function of sceptical doubt which is largely concerned with matters of dogma. Matters of dogma for Sextus Empiricus are associated with the realm of metaphysics, or, the "non-evident things", (p36) rather than with the world of everyday appearances in which he lives.<sup>6</sup> About the former, the sceptic makes no pronouncements while attempting to show the folly of those who do. About the latter, the sceptic proposes certain criteria, practical and conservative, as a guide for behaviour: namely, moderation of feeling and conformity to current social practice in the interests of a peaceful life. (p41)

According to this definition, scepticism is not a defence of negative dogmatism so much as a plea for intellectual caution, which does not preclude the formulation of criteria for dealing with everyday matters. Two of its limitations are, firstly, its apparent lack of curiosity about things metaphysical. The sceptic is the man "who leaves undetermined the question what things are good and bad by nature. He does not exert himself to avoid anything or to seek after anything, and hence he is in a tranquil state". (p41) Secondly, this cordoning off of things metaphysical, together with the nature of the practical criteria, mean that the sceptic is ill-equipped to challenge the institutions of the day in so far as he has made their practices his principle guide for action. Without having recourse to a value outside the system, the sceptic is without grounds for passing judgement on it, and is thus, potentially at least, in the position of the acquiescent relativist.<sup>7</sup> The activity of criticism and formulation of conservative criteria, remembering that "anything we say" may not be "wholly as we affirm it to be", does not lead the Pyrrhonist in the direction of negative dogmatism but in the direction of relativism and acquiescence to the status quo.

The scepticism of Jacques Derrida is more radical than the scepticism of the Pyrrhonists in so far as it is applied to the very language of inquiry and doubt which, Derrida claims, always and already implies a metaphysics, in other words, opinions about "non-evident things". Our customary use of language, says Derrida, rests on unthinking assumptions

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<sup>5</sup> p31.

<sup>6</sup> pp39-40, cf also p177.

<sup>7</sup> Hiley suggests acquiescence may still be tempered by criticism, however, as in the case of sixteenth-century Pyrrhonist Montaigne as opposed to some of his followers: "Though Montaigne would turn a critical eye toward the practices and values of ordinary life, in the hands of his followers the defense of ignorance became an apology for the existing order". (*Philosophy in Question*, p23) But when private reservations are translated into social action the hiatus between the sceptic's reservation of judgement and his implicit affirmation of value through action, is more clearly seen, thus exposing a fundamental difficulty in the sceptical position.

about the fixed nature of the signifieds to which language refers and on a certain confidence in their repeatability as intelligible concepts in discourse. Derrida shows how language can be used both to feed this illusion, of being able to talk about things as they really and always are, and to dispel it, by exposing the way the signifier creates the impression of substantiality through an intricate system of self-reference. Despite this extra-cautionary note, however, Derrida refuses the tag of nihilism as decisively as Sextus Empiricus:

I totally refuse the label of nihilism [...] Deconstruction is not an enclosure in nothingness, but an openness towards the other. [...] to distance oneself thus from the habitual structure of reference, to challenge or complicate our common assumptions about it, does not amount to saying that there is nothing beyond language.<sup>8</sup>

As with Pyrrhonian scepticism suspenseful inquiry, in every sense of the word, is still defended. In addition, Derrida retains something of the Pyrrhonist's conservatism, in so far as he continues to work within the philosophic system as he knows it, questioning its claim to offer a direct or authoritative perspective on the world, but recognizing its inevitability as a framework for thought in which he is accustomed to operate (see p148 of *De la grammatologie*: "[...] tous les concepts proposés jusqu'ici pour penser l'articulation d'un discours et d'une totalité historique sont pris dans la clôture métaphysique que nous questionnons ici"). Derrida's scepticism, then, would seem not to be a negative enterprise, any more than Pyrrho's, so much as a readiness to rethink fundamental philosophical concepts.

This still begs the question of what the criteria are that stimulate the awareness of limits, and spur the deconstructionist on to reconsider ways of thinking and writing. Derrida maintains that deconstruction is "not an enclosure in nothingness, but an openness towards the other". This suggests that the 'other' is what provokes the deconstructive process of subversion within the philosophical system. The following comments on the 'other' confirm this and are perhaps the closest Derrida comes to identifying his criterion, but as this 'other' is outside the boundaries of philosophic and linguistic convention it remains indefinable:

Deconstruction certainly entails a moment of affirmation. Indeed I cannot conceive of a radical critique which would not be ultimately motivated by some sort of affirmation, acknowledged or not [...] I do not mean that the deconstructing *subject* or *self* affirms. I mean that deconstruction is, in itself, a positive response to an alterity which necessarily calls, summons or motivates it. [...] The other, as the other than the self, the other that opposes self identity, is not something that can be detected and disclosed within a philosophical space and with the aid of a

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<sup>8</sup> In *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, p124.

Derrida himself approaches a “moment of affirmation” here, and then veers away, leaving the nature of his criterion still in doubt. It is not clear whether the consciousness of alterity for Derrida is perceived as an orientation towards an unnameable other and an indication, at the same time, of the ‘subject’s’ incompleteness, or whether alterity is to be seen as yet another fictional effect of the sign-system.<sup>10</sup> However, deconstruction’s acknowledgement of the unsettling effects of alterity on the signification process means that, unlike Pyrrhonism, it embraces a form of intellectual restlessness that is difficult to account for in empirical philosophic terms. It remains undecidable whether this criterion “under erasure” can also provide the basis for change or social criticism, whether deconstruction has the power to transform as well as to subvert.<sup>11</sup> But in the face of its openness towards the other, which opposes the coherence of self-identity, deconstruction cannot be described as a writing practice subscribing to philosophical or ideological acquiescence.

#### I.ii. The problem of the criterion in recent dialogic theory: Bakhtin, Kristeva and Robbe-Grillet

The problem of the criterion endemic to these two forms of scepticism, ancient and modern, is heightened in recent theory of textual dialogue, in which the notions of conflict, debate and challenge are of central importance. The restlessness that marks deconstruction as a result of its “response to an alterity” is magnified into something more conflictual and, in Robbe-Grillet’s case, more aggressive. Certainly, Bakhtin’s polyphony, Kristeva’s intertextuality and semiotic/symbolic interplay, Robbe-Grillet’s “langue” and “parole” conflict, are all in some way concerned to subvert conventional discourse, even though they sometimes reflect a Derridean reluctance to advance authoritative criteria for doing so. Consequently all three writers are caught up in the

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<sup>9</sup> p118. The problem of the other in relation to sceptical questioning is considered, in one of its aspects, in Chapter 3.

<sup>10</sup> Note, however, that Derrida rejects the idea of a fundamental lack actually structuring the subject as in the Lacanian model of desire. See *French Philosophers in Conversation*, p101.

<sup>11</sup> Derrida acknowledges the same problem of a hiatus between intellectual position and social participation I referred to earlier (see note, p56). “But the difficulty is to gesture in opposite directions at the same time: on the one hand to preserve a distance and suspicion with regard to the official political codes governing reality; on the other, to intervene here and now in a practical and *engagé* manner whenever the necessity arises. This position of dual allegiance, [...] is one of perpetual uneasiness. I try where I can to act politically while recognizing that such action remains incommensurate with my intellectual project of deconstruction”. (*Dialogues*, p120)

Scylla and Charybdis of relativism, on the one hand the dogmatism of institutionally acceptable thinking, and on the other, the lawless freedom they seem to promote and which may lead back, via anarchy, to acquiescence to the status quo. Each of these writers merits examination in turn for the illumination they provide on the same problem of subversion and anarchic affirmation in Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet's novels: Robbe-Grillet supplying much of his own theoretical commentary, Bakhtin, and Kristeva after Bakhtin, propounding the theories of polyphony and intertextuality, or dialogism, for which Dostoyevsky is one of the most significant models.

### **I.iii. Bakhtin and polyphony**

"Polyphony", meaning many voices, is Bakhtin's metaphor for the interaction between different styles and viewpoints in the novel. In the thoroughly polyphonic novel, the different perspectives are not presented as abstract ideas so much as lived ideas embodied in the novel's characters, whose combined dialogues and self-commentaries cannot then be reduced to a single idea, or associated directly and unambiguously with the viewpoint of the author. The emphasis is not on subversion for subversion's sake, but on an unsettling of the notion of a dominant perspective, either from the character's or the reader's point of view, in the light of human incompleteness and complexity. The reminder of the limitations implicit in individual perspectives and the invitation to attempt a transcendence of this limitation through interaction with others,<sup>12</sup> makes Bakhtin more of a traditional humanist than either Kristeva or Robbe-Grillet. Verbal give and take between characters, what Bakhtin calls the "coexistence without confusion" of opposite voices, is illustrated primarily with reference to Dostoyevsky. Dostoyevsky's novels, according to Bakhtin, vibrate with polyphonic exchanges among the characters, and between the characters and their author, who becomes another character whose unique point of view has been written into the novel.

Bakhtin's theory is appealing, particularly since it appears to correlate perfectly with its mercurial literary counterpart. Reinforcing the sense of appropriateness is the fact that Bakhtin's conscious ambivalence has, like the ambivalence in Dostoyevsky, sometimes elicited accusations of relativism — one possible outcome of sustained sceptical debate. René Wellek, for example, who sees Dostoyevsky as a writer of passionate conviction, is critical of a tendency towards ideological pluralism in Bakhtin, concluding in a 1980 essay: "It is disconcerting to think that Bakhtin propounded a theory which renders Dostoevsky somehow harmless, neutralizes his teaching, makes him a

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<sup>12</sup> See my following chapter for a discussion of the role played by the interpersonal in the signification process.

relativist".<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Victor Terras expresses reservations about the relativistic implications of Bakhtin's argument, suggesting that polyphony is "merely an artistic flaw" characterizing the earlier works of Dostoyevsky, while the later ones demonstrate a clear hierarchy of voices.<sup>14</sup> Christopher Pike conceives a slightly different solution to the problem, interpreting the ambivalence of Dostoyevsky's writing as a sign of two different personalities in the author, the open-minded liberal and the dogmatic believer, making Dostoyevsky polyphonic and monologic at the same time. This fact, he insists, is "of the essence in understanding his work and its appeal to diverse minds".<sup>15</sup> Both critics appear to share Welles's assumption that commitment to belief is not merely exclusive of relativism, but is also incompatible with the radical form of argumentation Bakhtin advocates. All three thus question the congruence between Bakhtin and Dostoyevsky's thinking, on the grounds that their assumptions are entirely different.

It is true that in the first chapter of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, where Bakhtin lays the groundwork for his thesis, it is suggested that all contradictory viewpoints are vindicated in Dostoyevsky, (p14) that his novels are "unresolvedly pluralistic", (p22) and that the many consciousnesses of his characters do not merge in "the unity of a developing spirit". (p21) Even more marked is the apparent hostility to religious belief in art which Bakhtin expresses in *The Dialogic Imagination*. In the same work Bakhtin argues that the religious point of view which makes itself heard in a Dostoyevsky novel, whether or not it is preferred above others, constitutes a flaw in novelistic discourse, being incapable of what Bakhtin calls "double-voicedness":

[...] images of official-authoritative truth, images of virtue [...] have never been successful in the novel. It suffices to mention the hopeless attempts of Gogol and Dostoevsky in this regard. For this reason the authoritative text always remains, in the novel, a dead quotation, something that falls out of the artistic context [...].<sup>16</sup>

From being a non-committal relativist Bakhtin seems almost to take up the position of a dogmatist here, such is his discomfort with an ideological position that is too clearly delineated in a literary context.

Bakhtin's position on the issue of belief is perhaps more difficult to ascertain even than

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<sup>13</sup> 'Bakhtin's view of Dostoevsky: "polyphony" and "carnavalesque"', p35.

<sup>14</sup> *New Essays*, p35. Terras reverses this judgement in his 1990 work on *The Idiot*. Suggesting that the "polyphonic qualities characteristic of Dostoevsky's major works appear to a much lesser extent in *The Idiot*" (p91) he then argues "as Bakhtin's analysis has made plausible, the peculiar polyphonic energy of Dostoevsky's texts is a cardinal factor of his creative achievement". (p92)

<sup>15</sup> p199.

<sup>16</sup> *The Dialogic Imagination*, p344.

Dostoyevsky's. For elsewhere in his writings, Bakhtin argues against the relativist attitude he sometimes appears to adopt and, more importantly, defines truth in such a way as to avoid dogmatism of either positive or negative kinds. In the second chapter of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Bakhtin explicitly rejects relativism and makes a similar distinction to the one made by Sextus Empiricus between dogmatist, academic and sceptic:

It should be noted that both relativism and dogmatism equally exclude all argumentation and all genuine dialog, either by making them unnecessary (relativism) or impossible (dogmatism). (p56)

Bakhtin also admits the centrality of the Christian voice to Dostoyevsky's novels when he suggests that it is another and his word (namely, Christ), which supplies a possible authoritative orientation in Dostoyevsky's polyphony, which is then crowned by this "highest of voices". (p80) In acknowledging the latent authority of this voice in Dostoyevsky Bakhtin does not necessarily equate it with the image of "official-authoritative truth" he disparages in *The Dialogic Imagination*. The notion of personal truth Bakhtin details in *Problems* (p81) is one which entails personal engagement rather than solely intellectual acknowledgement and, according to Bakhtin's understanding of things, such engagement with the other is an important guarantee against the closure of individualism and ideology.<sup>17</sup> Hence Bakhtin's interpretation of Dostoyevskyeen polyphony would appear to incorporate the double possibility of ongoing critical debate as well as some form of criterion for criticism which could be defined as *truth-as-relationships* — a criterion which preserves the unfinalizable nature of Dostoyevsky's world as Bakhtin interprets it.

#### **I.iv. Kristeva: intertextuality and the ambivalent "word" of the novel**

Intertextual analysis, of which Kristeva is the best-known exponent, shifts the focus of interest from the story and its characters, and so from the criterion of truth-as-relationships, to the various meaning systems interacting within the novel. This textual polyphony is a borrowing from Bakhtin and his view that every word or word-group retains a 'memory' of its former contexts, and therefore resonates with a number of different associations over and above those attributed to it in the new context. The indirect reference to other perspectives through a word or phrase ensures a complex play of interrelationships within the text, whose meaning is then implicitly challenged by

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<sup>17</sup> Derrida also refers to the "other that opposes self-identity" but without giving it the strong interpersonal orientation it has in Bakhtin. This is a point I am taking up in my next chapter.

other discourses. Hence Laurent Jenny's assessment that: "Le regard intertextuel est donc un regard critique, et c'est ce qui le définit".<sup>18</sup> For example, when lines from a sentimental love poem are transposed into a diatribe of pettiness and egotism (in Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*), or when a mythical character is included in a family history (Corinthe in Robbe-Grillet's *Le miroir qui revient*), one 'text' modifies and relativizes the meaning of the other, so that egotism is sentimentalized, and history mythologized.

For Kristeva, however, this dialogue between texts is underwritten by a far more pervasive dialogue, namely, the interaction between what she terms the semiotic and symbolic orders and which is the basis for all writing practice, in her view, as well as being responsible for the formation of the speaking/writing subject from childhood. More specifically, this interchange concerns, on the one hand, psychic drives and impulses (the semiotic), and on the other, the structures of family and society to which a child is initiated when it gains access to language (the symbolic). In so far as literature could be said to represent an alternative discourse to the one sanctioned by society it offers an arena *par excellence* for the interaction of the occluded chaotic impulses with the formalized structures of language, where the latter is undermined and enlivened by the "anarchic revolt" of the former.<sup>19</sup> As each of these forces is interdependent of the other in the signifying process there is a sense in which each also relativizes the other's influence in the text, and from this grows the Kristevan idea of a dialectic which literature realizes "le plus complètement" and which functions "sans absolutisation du théétique susceptible de s'ériger en interdit théologique, sans dénégation du théétique fantasmant un irrationalisme atomiseur".<sup>20</sup>

Kristeva's earlier thinking on the dialogic text seems to be even more relativistic in its implications than Bakhtin's theory of polyphony. In *Desire and Language*, she describes the thoroughly dialogic novel as one free from all values and moral distinctions,<sup>21</sup> particularly the value associated with a theological referent. The latter is judged too restrictive on the dialectical play between language and the "logic" of the unconscious. Ironically, she lists Dostoyevsky among those "polyphonic" novelists who have

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<sup>18</sup> Laurent Jenny, 'La stratégie de la forme', p260.

<sup>19</sup> Léon S. Roudiez's term in his introduction to the English translation of *La révolution du langage poétique*, p3.

<sup>20</sup> *La révolution du langage poétique*, p80. Note that "le théétique", or, 'thetic break' in Kristeva refers to the moment of separation of the child from its mother (and the formless drives and impulses of the semiotic she represents), and the accession, at the same time, to the ordered, normative structures of language and society.

<sup>21</sup> p82. This comes through in Kristeva's description of Menippean discourse, an early literary genre which Bakhtin has suggested prepared the way for the novel form.

participated in the struggle against Christianity, for example, and its representation in art, (pp79-80) concluding, "Only modernity —when freed of 'God' — releases the Menippean force of the novel".<sup>22</sup> This seems to contradict her own statement about the place of the thetic ("thinking within a proposition") in writing, and about the dialogue in the text between value and its transgression, between meaning and instinctual "jouissance". Her comment echoes Bakhtin's remark on images of "official-authoritative truth" in *The Dialogic Imagination*, and reveals her own apparent preference for semiotic revolt over symbolic legalism, despite the interdependence of the two in her theory of signification.

For the semiotic is what Kristeva ultimately associates with the critical power of the text and the force of its protest and the liberating effects of its transgressions. The semiotic operates in a space that is "rythmé, sans thèse, sans position" and is itself "jamais définitivement posée".<sup>23</sup> In so far as Kristeva can be said to offer any criterion, then, for the critical aspects of the dialogic text it is, like Derrida's notion of alterity, essentially unnamable even though, in Kristeva's case, the 'unnameable' seems to have so many verbalized attributes. Anarchic, amoral, associated with destruction as much as with creativity, the semiotic concerns an endless subversion of the prohibitions and potential narrow-mindedness of institutionalized thinking. Yet Kristeva recognizes the potential dangers of these anarchic forces and the necessity, therefore, of that which keeps them in check. If, then, Kristeva breathes the same "air du temps" as Robbe-Grillet and Derrida, maintaining a similar attitude of revolt against authority, she is careful to acknowledge the role of both 'semiotic' and 'symbolic' forces in the signification process. One cannot exist without the other, even though the emotive nature of her language still betrays a preference for the former.<sup>24</sup>

#### I.v. 'Langue' and 'Parole' in Robbe-Grillet: novelistic discourse as conflict and evasion

<sup>22</sup> *Desire in Language*, p85. Kristeva seems to have modified her view of Dostoyevsky, to whom she devotes a chapter in her later psychoanalytic study *Le soleil noir*. Here she refers to him as "le chrétien Dostoïevski", exploring the theological dimension of his writing in considerable detail and making a connection between polyphony and some of the religious concepts in Dostoyevsky. However, faith is still seen primarily in rational, and ultimately repressive, ideological terms.

<sup>23</sup> *La révolution du langage poétique*, pp 25 and 23. Terms used in a discussion of what Kristeva calls here "la 'chora' sémiotique".

<sup>24</sup> A preference which is much more marked in the language of Barthes, for example, for whom authority always and of necessity assumes the guise of a repressive father-figure.



Robbe-Grillet's description at a 1982 colloquium of the conflict in his novels reads as a repeat, in less psychoanalytic terms, of Kristeva's scenario of the interaction between the symbolic and the semiotic in writing practice:

books are where the fight of the world takes place because it is in the text that the world creates itself in the form of a fight between irreconcilable forces — forces, let us say, like the prevailing ideology and revolution [...] and more generally, order and disorder.<sup>25</sup>

However, of all the writers discussed thus far, Robbe-Grillet is the most exuberant iconoclast when it comes to committing himself to statements of value. When expressing reservations about the place of conventional meaningfulness in literature he once translated the question onto a plane of spectral authoritarianism by referring to "l'ennemi du sens".<sup>26</sup> The artist, it seems, is always a player of games, never an arbiter of values, and when once challenged about his apparent championing of an alternative order to the one upheld by conventional ideology, he hastened to explain that this did not commit him to a statement of value or truth: "it is never a question of replacing the Tsar's statue by a statue of Stalin. It is a question of never placing any statue in position, but continuing to slip".<sup>27</sup>

The reluctance to align himself with any sort of a metanarrative is therefore clear, but what is equally clear is that Robbe-Grillet sees his novels as "sites of conflict" which theoretically engage with and unsettle the metanarratives they do not want imposed on them — the paradox of criticism without criteria recurs once again. The ambivalent notion of art as play that is both arbitrary and purposive is a theme running through nearly all of Robbe-Grillet's critical writing. On the one hand, the artist's ludism is associated with the privileging of invention over social responsibility to the point of a categorical exclusion of political, moral, psychological or religious concerns. As Robbe-Grillet writes in a 1957 essay:

l'artiste ne met rien au-dessus de son travail, et il s'aperçoit vite qu'il ne peut créer que *pour rien*; la moindre directive extérieure le paralyse, le moindre souci de didactisme, ou seulement de signification lui est une insupportable gêne [...] l'instant de la création ne peut que le ramener aux seuls problèmes de son art.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Three Decades of the French New Novel*, p26.

<sup>26</sup> See pp35-36 of *Alain Robbe-Grillet: analyse, théorie*. cf *Pour un nouveau roman*, p40: "si l'art est quelque chose, il est *tout*, qu'il suffit par conséquent à soi-même, et qu'il n'y a rien au-delà".

<sup>27</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'Order and disorder in film and fiction', p16. Some of the consequences of this way of thinking to the law of contradiction are discussed in my previous chapter on contradiction and difference.

<sup>28</sup> *Pour un nouveau roman*, p35.

The desire to concentrate exclusively on things aesthetic, and the tendency towards self-reference that results from such discomfort with “la moindre direction extérieure”, constitute the evasive aspects of Robbe-Grillet’s ludism. Any revolution in the text is limited, in this case, to stylistic experiments which may dazzle without necessarily challenging, or even attempting to challenge, habits of thought.

On the other hand, however, Robbe-Grillet clearly seeks to authenticate play in relation to the discourses he is excluding, and even to make a space for it within their boundaries. He reacts strongly to suggestions of escapism despite the fact that some of his own comments seem to defend precisely this attitude. A desire for authentication, then, and for a certain relevance, necessitate engagement with social practice and a readiness to confront and question. Thus we find the inventiveness which characterizes “l’écriture romanesque” in ‘Du réalisme à la réalité’ is also a “remise en question”,<sup>29</sup> and the gratuitousness of art that retreats from political statements is elsewhere made the key to the novelist’s social engagement, as Robbe-Grillet argues that man must play as well as work and, more basically still, that man’s capacity to fantasize is what distinguishes him from the animals.<sup>30</sup> The two contrary impulses are ‘synthesized’ in the following remark:

Notre parole ludique n’est pas fait pour nous protéger [...] mais au contraire pour nous mettre en question nous-mêmes et ce monde, et par conséquent le transformer.<sup>31</sup>

The aesthetic revolution is to be given social relevance as well by virtue of its power to challenge and transform our perceptions.

In the end, Robbe-Grillet’s criterion has more in common with the indeterminate criterion of Kristeva and Derrida than with the practical criterion and “plain language” of the Greek sceptics. In fact, Robbe-Grillet and the nineteenth-century Dostoyevsky could both be said to be in conflict with the notion of practicality upheld by the earlier sceptics in so far as this places undesirable limits on the irregularities of their imaginative worlds. For while the novelists, like the sceptics of antiquity, may adopt a critical stance towards the attitudes of their day, their methodology is, not unnaturally, different from the reasoned argumentation favoured by Sextus Empiricus, as is their perception of the target of criticism, and the nature of that which attracts their curiosity and attention.

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<sup>29</sup> p138.

<sup>30</sup> cf Dostoyevsky’s insistence in *Notes* that caprice rather than rational analysis is what distinguishes man from the “sprig on the cylinder of a barrel-organ”.

<sup>31</sup> *Nouveau roman; hier, aujourd’hui*, p97.

In the four works chosen for analysis in the chapter, Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* and *The Devils*, Robbe-Grillet's *Projet pour une révolution à New York* and *Le miroir qui revient*, there is some argumentation but much, too, of Kristeva's "anarchic revolt" and Derrida's playful subversion of logical concepts. Imagery, interrupted sequences, the evocation of atmosphere and emotion signify the special methodology of the novelist while also implying one possible object of his criticism, namely, the exclusion of such manifestations of desire and emotion by institutions that allow no place for their disruptions. In this respect, it could be argued that art itself represents the novelist's criterion, and even that art is 'naturally' subversive in so far as it represents a permanent reminder, as Auden once phrased it, that *homo laborans* is also *homo ludens*,<sup>32</sup> that play and creativity are suppressed to society's, and the individual's, mutual impoverishment. Furthermore, if the methodology and object of criticism are different from those of a classical philosopher the arena for inquiry is also elsewhere in the novels. The scepticism defined by Sextus Empiricus seems to imply that to go beyond the empirical world of common-sense was to indulge in pure fantasizing.<sup>33</sup> Yet it is this shadowy world of inapprehensibles that, in some way special to each, fascinates and intrigues the two novelists. In Dostoyevsky, the dynamic energy associated with creativity is perceived to have negative as well as positive aspects, and in *The Devils*, we are shown the almost imperceptible, yet significant, turning point at which wonder and "jouissance" become wanton destruction. This introduces a moral criterion that is absent from *Notes* and alien to *Projet* and *Le miroir*. Because of the intangibility, however, of the imaginative and metaphysical worlds in which both novelists operate, the problem of the criterion is particularly ambivalent. It is one thing to fight logic with logic, but quite another to subvert, negate and affirm in the name of what Sextus Empiricus calls "non-evident things".

### *The Devils*

#### II.i. Polyphony: the impact of personal interaction

Polyphony seems an appropriate metaphor for the opening pages of *The Devils* where the build-up to the "extraordinary events" of later chapters begins with a gleefully

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<sup>32</sup> "The poet and the city", pp88-89.

<sup>33</sup> Note, however, that while Sextus Empiricus suggests that "concerning non-evident things the Pyrrhonian philosopher holds no opinion" (p36) he concedes there are times when perception is strangely altered, in times of sickness, for example, or when sleeping. In such cases it can be said that "although our dream images are unreal in our waking state, they are nevertheless not absolutely unreal, for they do exist in our dreams". (*Sextus Empiricus. Selections from the Major Writings*, p60)

speculative portrait of one of the novel's main characters. The circulation of different rumours concerning Stepan Verkhovensky creates a strong effect of polyphony, whose initial purpose, however, is to create an atmosphere of suspense and excitement at the anticipated loss of control associated with the "extraordinary events" hinted at in the opening lines. In other words, polyphony has no strongly Bakhtinian connotations at its first appearance, being suggestive, rather, of the technique of the thriller novel where deliberately obscure hints are used to capture, and thereafter play with, the reader's attention.<sup>34</sup> ("He stopped his lectures on the Arabs because someone (probably one of his reactionary enemies) had somehow or other intercepted a letter to someone giving an account of certain 'circumstances' as a result of which someone else had demanded some kind of explanation from him".) (p23) The narrator, whose task is to decipher the riddles concerning Verkhovensky and the disturbing social trends with which he seems in some way affiliated, declares it "impossible to accommodate oneself to these ideas or to find out exactly what they meant". (p35)

Nevertheless, for all their vague suggestiveness, these "ideas" gradually take shape in the lives of the characters. It becomes clear that the arena for the critical exploration and testing of an idea is an interpersonal one, in which voices of a different tenor and personality are juxtaposed. The interpersonal element is thus crucial to demonstrating the absence of any indisputable, self-evident point of view in Dostoyevskyeian polyphony. The poetic enthusiasms of Mr Verkhovensky are cut short by the aggressive little stabs of Mrs Stavrogin; Peter's "smooth-grained" patter contrasts with Shatov's clumsy outbursts. The bringing together of these characters, many of whom have an indefatigable love of confrontation, ensures continuous verbal warfare. At the same time, the close interaction between the characters and the numerous meeting points in their lives, past and present, results in a mutual relativizing of each other's position, or at least, an awareness that each other's attitudes are not infallible or invulnerable to change.

The dilettante Stavrogin, for example, has instilled opposing beliefs of Christianity and atheism into Shatov and Kirilov, who then act as permanent reminders of values he once toyed with and discarded, while he, on the other hand, represents to them the possibility of a philosophical indifference without hope or desire. (pp666-667) In the encounter between Shatov and Stavrogin, Stavrogin's indifference casts a shadow over

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<sup>34</sup> Beletskii summarizes the function of such techniques in what he calls the "boulevard novel" as "making it possible to hold the interest of a reader who was in a state of extreme excitement and was not overly concerned with verisimilitude; these motifs made him swallow a book in one gulp and wait in nervous agitation for its sequel". Cited in 'Dostoevsky's *The Devils* and the antinihilist novel', p446.

Shatov's vision of truth (already somewhat dimmed by the latter's own hesitations), while Shatov discomforts Stavrogin by stirring his memory of a former crime (p260) and leaves him with a suggestion to visit Bishop Tikhon (which Stavrogin later takes up). Similarly, the lethargic Stavrogin is impressed by Kirilov's fanaticism, and he agrees with the latter's insistence that everyone is "basically good" even though he himself has pursued a life of wilful and sometimes destructive dissipation. (pp241-244) After insisting that he is "not looking for anyone's approval", he asks Kirilov, with almost childlike anxiety: "You're not angry with me are you?", (p295) demonstrating his need of the other's recognition and acceptance. Thus while each character's position is differentiated, the interrelationships between them and their susceptibility to each other's responses results in something approaching the mutually contradicting and qualifying process associated with polyphony and intertextuality.

## II.ii. The novelist's criterion? Play and chaos in the text

One of the prerequisites for an exchange of views is that the respective parties listen to one another as a preliminary to understanding what each other is saying. But polyphony of this egalitarian nature is not always to be found in the novel. Frequently characters fail to listen, and talk around rather than to each other as if interested only in exploring their own ideas. Peter Verkhovensky is perhaps the most skilled at ignoring other points of view to the extent that he will "invent a man himself and live with him", (p364) and, despite the fact that he is increasingly proved wrong, persists in his opinionated inventions. Even in the more intensely dialogic scenes between Stavrogin and Kirilov there is a sense in which each pursues his own private thoughts where the other's speech figures as an interruption rather than a challenge ("Let us suppose that you had lived on the moon, Stavrogin interrupted, without listening and continuing to develop his idea"). (p242) Hence in Dostoyevsky's world of interacting characters all characters do not, as Bakhtin suggests in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, always understand other points of view "perfectly" (p60) because they are not always interested in them.

Polyphony, however, can accommodate this kind of miscomprehension and it is noteworthy that all of the characters in the novel at some point confound the expectations others have of them, thus reestablishing an awareness of other perspectives. (A point I will develop in my next chapter.) What places most strain on the concept of polyphony as *an inquiry into other points of view* is the deliberate frustration of the desire for understanding reflected in the characters' love of invention, and their use of language to deceive rather than illuminate. Polyphony becomes

cacophony in the shift from ideological uncertainty to an elaborated and artful confusion.

Mr Verkhovensky's speech, for example, is often garbled because of his emotionalism, an outpouring of feeling which suggests an intense desire to communicate.<sup>35</sup> Yet Mr Verkhovensky obviously enjoys the sensationalist effects of his incoherence as, grandly and maniacally, he rehearses possible roles, mesmerized by the impression he is creating in his own and other people's minds.<sup>36</sup> It is the seductiveness of these different self-images that absorbs Mr Verkhovensky's attention more than the desire to understand and respond to the other. Resolutions to act and communicate sincerely are constantly swept aside in the wake of "some new and tempting train of thought", (p220) suggesting, in a more lighthearted vein, the infinitely digressive potential of language that Derrida explores, the impossibility of ever beginning or arriving 'in one piece'. Even after he has turned his back on civilisation, and run off with only an umbrella to protect him from the elements, Mr Verkhovensky cannot resist clothing himself in the accoutrements of fantasy, thus warding off more mundane considerations. (pp534-535) Pouring his heart out to the timid little bible-seller he meets on the road he revives under the spell of his own rhetoric, "almost believing in the story he was telling her". (p642)

With Mr Verkhovensky, however, there is a passing awareness of deceit in relation to truth, (p645) whereas with Stavrogin, who in some respects is Mr Verkhovensky's ideological offspring, verbal masks and deceit have become a way of being. Stavrogin's challenge to rational communication, unlike Mr Verkhovensky's, is controlled and sometimes vicious, so that, when questioned about his motives for pulling a man by the nose, in mocking enactment of that gentleman's favourite expression ("No sir, they won't lead me by the nose"), (p58) he bites his interlocutor's ear by way of reply. (p63) Shatov recognizes the challenge to "common sense" that is also implicit in Stavrogin's marriage to Mary Lebyatkin, (p267) and in his confession to Bishop Tikhon, Stavrogin hints he may have told "a lot of lies". (p700) It is this sustained artfulness in Stavrogin that Robbe-Grillet singled out for approving comment in the Canterbury lecture and which, ultimately, has more to do with the defiant evasion of structured meaning associated with the fear of being finalized (Bakhtin), and the semiotic (Kristeva), than with any form of ideological or philosophic debate.

Is the characters' wayward humanity, then, their love of deceit and flights of fancy, the sign of authentic value in the novel, and even, the real reason behind the broad and changing spectrum of ideologies in this "polyphonic" novel? Is it perhaps that no point

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<sup>35</sup> See, for example, pp104, 131-134.

<sup>36</sup> See pp21, 30, 40.

of view can adequately contain this all-important creative excitement?

Bakhtin's theory in many ways envisages such a conclusion. In Chapter 2 of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* polyphony is linked to the hero's desire to escape final meanings. Man is free, argues Bakhtin, and can therefore "overturn any rules which are forced upon him". (p48) This would seem to imply that the desire to be free of the restraints implicit in ideological thinking is even more fundamental than the desire to examine the respective merits of particular ideologies, or, "ideolectes", as Bakhtin sometimes calls them. In Kristeva the release of what she terms semiotic impulses is even more strongly linked to something of vital importance in the text, namely, the breaking down and reformulating of theses which, if unchallenged, limit perception and stifle spontaneity and life. The dynamic element in the text is related to the possibility of renewal in so far as semiotic anarchy forces reappraisals of habitual concepts and attitudes. But Kristeva is careful to introduce no moral imperatives, no distinctions between good or evil, in her analysis of this irruption of psychic forces into rational discourse. Moral imperatives, as already indicated in the introduction to the chapter, belong to the domain of the symbolic.<sup>37</sup>

There is plenty of evidence in *The Devils* that the characters are drawn to the state of primitive chaos which Kristeva associates with pre-symbolic experience, namely, the undifferentiated realm of instincts and desires the child represses when it enters the symbolic order of language. A passage from the novel she herself quotes in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* records Mr Verkhovensky's fascination with the destructive effects of a fire which acts as a lure to his own socially-contained destructive forces:

A real fire is quite another matter: there the horror and a certain sense of personal danger, combined with the well-known exhilarating effect of a fire at night, produce in the spectator [...] a certain shock to the brain and, as it were, a challenge to his own destructive instincts [...] This grim sensation is almost always delightful. <sup>38</sup>

In the novel as a whole, however, there is no guarantee that impulses such as these contain the promise of renewal as an inevitable part of their outworking, any more than the fantastic posturings of Mr Verkhovensky constitute an effective defence against the negations of nihilism. The physical damage caused by the fire is as appalling as the

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<sup>37</sup> In Bakhtin this compulsion is qualified by the relation to the other and hence a form of ethical responsibility that is not equatable with the legalism of Kristeva's symbolic, which is also, however, an effect of the relation with the other. (See *La révolution du langage poétique*, p29.)

<sup>38</sup> *The Devils*, p512, cited in French in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* pp25-26. I am grateful to Simon Dickie for drawing my attention to this particular passage.

psychological effects of the invasion of "semiotic" anarchy in the character of Lembke, who collapses mentally and emotionally under the strain of his failure to either contain social chaos, or communicate with his wife who insists on dabbling in it. (p441) And in so far as they participate in this anarchy Dostoyevsky's characters must be seen to be complicitous with the chaos instigated by the revolutionaries, and thus, with the nihilism Dostoyevsky is ostensibly attempting to refute in the novel.<sup>39</sup>

To a certain extent this is precisely what happens. The characters who distance themselves from Peter Verkhovensky's programme of chaos nonetheless acquiesce to it in their determined evasion of ideological fetters, and thus, of the barriers that might help contain chaos. Stavrogin, the prince of intellectual doodling, admits in his suicide letter that: "One can go on arguing about anything for ever, but from me nothing has come but negation with no magnanimity and no force. Even negation has not come from me". (p667) This is, in its most extreme expression, the sceptic's problem of an unqualified refusal to affirm or deny. Not to make any distinctions from a fear of final statements means acquiescing to every manifestation of folly, since all things are equal (an extreme which the Pyrrhonist sceptics avoid through the practical criterion).

I believe, however, that at different moments in the narrative and through different characters, this same amoral creative/destructive orientation Kristeva identifies with the semiotic is related to a sense of value, and so, to a metaphysical dimension that has a more ethical definition than Kristeva's semiotic anarchy, without being reducible to the legalism and repressive intellectualism she associates with the symbolic order. The value in question is beyond unrestrained personal expression, since it involves confrontation with an alterity, and it is something other than anarchy, since it has to do with a celebratory embrace, an explosive affirmation.

Two key passages which focus attention on this ambivalent but metaphysically oriented value, are the encounter between Kirilov and Stavrogin, where the former explains his "man-god" philosophy, (pp238-45) and Shatov's response to the birth of Marie's child. (pp587-92) Kirilov's philosophy is anything but metaphysical in so far as he plans to commit suicide in a bid to eradicate limits and any form of value-as-limit that challenge his self-will. For death and the fear of death represent the ultimate obstacle to freedom and can only be defeated, Kirilov argues, through being willingly embraced. ("Full freedom will come only when it makes no difference whether to live or not to live"). (p25) Such determined indifference is to be further demonstrated by Kirilov's writing of a suicide note, to Peter Verkhovensky's dictation, in which Kirilov will accept

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<sup>39</sup> See Serge Gregory's 'Dostoevsky's *The Devils* and the anti-nihilist novel'.



responsibility for crimes perpetrated by Verkhovensky and the revolutionaries.

Complicating this collusion with violence, however, is Kirilov's statement that "All's good", which enables him to both justify crime as part of a total picture (p243) and to crowd it out of that picture through a joyful response to the beauty of the natural world. For at the heart of Kirilov's philosophy is not a reasoned position but an image: an image of a leaf with the light shining through it and whose imagined freshness provides quite a different "shock to the brain" from the one administered to Stepan Verkhovensky by the fire. It stirs in Kirilov a belief in the possibility of an overwhelming happiness, however bizarrely he then reasons his way towards this end:

I saw a [leaf] recently, a yellow one, a little green, wilted at the edges. Blown by the wind. When I was a boy of ten I used to shut my eyes deliberately in winter and imagine a green leaf, bright green, with veins on it, and the sun shining. I used to open my eyes and I couldn't believe it because it was so beautiful, and I used to shut them again. (p243)

Stavrogin, looking for a 'message' in this asks, "What's that? An allegory?" to which Kirilov replies, "N-no- why? Not an allegory, just a leaf, one leaf. A leaf's good. All's good." Kirilov's confession cuts both ways. It contains no reasoned defence against nihilism. On the contrary. In philosophic and practical terms it represents a passive assent to it. Nonetheless it contains an inkling of Dostoyevsky's implied criterion in the novel's critique of nihilism. The quality of Kirilov's affirmation is such that it momentarily belittles the nihilist programme, and in so far as it is a response, an almost worshipful response to beauty, it contains a denial, also, of its negations<sup>40</sup>

The point at which Kirilov's affirmation of life becomes the positing of a metaphysics in the novel occurs in the second passage where a love of life is linked to a sense of its sanctity. Shatov's response to the birth of Marie's child (invoking another Mary and child?) is mystical as well as ecstatic and his inarticulate joy is like, yet qualitatively unlike, the malicious frenzy of the filibusters:

'It's a great joy [...] The mystery of the coming of a new human being is a great and incomprehensible mystery, Mrs Virginsky' [...] Shatov muttered incoherently, dazed and entranced. It was as though something were swinging about in his head and pouring out of his soul involuntarily, in spite of himself. (p588)

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<sup>40</sup> Kirilov's embrace of life is, in fact, very similar to Meursault's in Camus's *L'Etranger*. Both characters shie away from moral distinctions (Meursault argues that the pimp, Raymond, is as good as the upright Céleste and that Salamano's dog "valait autant que sa femme"), yet both, in their passionate love of beauty and desire to be caught up in it, affirm a value beyond themselves which is *not-yet-a-metaphysics*.

It is from some unconscious acknowledgement of the importance of this event and the happiness it brings that the small-time revolutionary, Mr Virginsky, attempts to ward off the planned attack on Shatov's life. (p595) From this point on Virginsky withdraws his consent to the murder which he suddenly sees as an act of sacrilege. His protest to this effect is all the more powerful for coming from the mouth of a hitherto weak and acquiescent man:

But when the stones had been tied on and Peter stood up, Virginsky suddenly began trembling nervously and, throwing up his hands in grief and despair, shouted at the top of his voice: 'That's wrong, wrong! That's all wrong!' (p600)

A love of life and a sense of its sanctity is the value in the novel that arguably modifies the dogmatic strain in Dostoyevsky's political and religious views. David Magarshack's introductory remarks on the novel suggest that Dostoyevsky's political views on Russia and his religious views, which were "perhaps entirely in harmony" with these (a plea for a return to "Christ and the Russian soil"),<sup>41</sup> constitute "a serious blot on a novel which, in spite of its structural and artistic blemishes, possesses a tremendous vitality [...]". (xvii) In my view, however, the "tremendous vitality" Magarshack refers to interacts significantly with Dostoyevsky's political and religious views in the novel, balancing their potential legalism, reaching beyond the pettiness of some of the judgements informing them. The love of life that Zossima the elder acknowledges in Dostoyevsky's last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, with its potential for pantheism,<sup>42</sup> is also a principle in *The Devils* that fulfils and surpasses the negativism of the letter of the law and is perhaps, in this sense, truer to the voice of faith in Dostoyevsky's polyphony than the anti-revolutionary passages.

One possible reading of the privileging of image and emotion over doctrine is as a reflection of the emphasis in Russian spirituality on the heart rather than the intellect. Joseph Frank documents Dostoyevsky's upbringing as a child in an atmosphere that was both Orthodox and folk-oriented but suggests that while he was well-versed in Gospel and old testament narratives the "attempt of theologians to rationalize the mysteries of faith [...] never held any appeal for Dostoevsky from the very beginning".<sup>43</sup> Certainly as a novelist Dostoyevsky often insists on the non-dialectical nature of his characters'

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<sup>41</sup> Dostoyevsky's letter to Maykov, 1868, cited in Magarshack's introduction to the novel, p viii.

<sup>42</sup> See *The Brothers Karamazov*, p269.

<sup>43</sup> *The Seeds of Revolt*, p44. A. B. Gibson similarly records a comment from the young Dostoyevsky: "Nature, the soul, God, love — all this is understood by the heart not by the mind". (*The Religion of Dostoevsky*, p9)

arguments (such as Prince Myshkin's in *The Idiot*) and this is sufficiently pointed to suggest something more than nineteenth-century *Sehnsucht* or an adult lack of conviction about matters of faith. On the contrary, it is a preference which accords with what Tomas Spidlak suggests is one of the distinguishing features of Russian spirituality: "Many writers chose the heart as symbol to distinguish themselves from the "rationalist" West which seems to forget that the formulation of Christian and devotional life is the heart".<sup>44</sup> It is true that the affirmation of religious feeling in Dostoyevsky is not always explicitly Christian and certainly not always Orthodox in the sense of conforming to Church doctrine. The love of life I have underlined in *The Devils* is often more of a Nietzschean "yay-saying" than a coherent expression of belief. Nevertheless in so far as the shaping force of Dostoyevsky's faith was not the laws of the old testament, or the church doctrine of the new, so much as a personal and emotional response to the beauty of Christ,<sup>45</sup> a link can be established between the primitive vitality of a character like Kirilov and the more explicit religious feeling of a character like Shatov. The emotional generosity of both is linked to their spirituality and capacity to respond to something outside themselves (a capacity that Stavrogin, for instance, seems to have neglected.<sup>46</sup> Hence the view of a celebratory affirmation of life in the novel that is also a metaphysics in the making.<sup>47</sup>

By contrast are the passages where Dostoyevsky expounds his ideas in the light of a more dogmatic religious judgement. This gives the text a bias, on occasions, that is far from polyphonic, reacting on its readers either like an inspired or intriguing revelation, or like the "dead quotation" of Bakhtin's official truth, depending on the reader's own

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<sup>44</sup> *The Heritage of the Early Church*, p363.

<sup>45</sup> See his letter to Mme N.D. Fonvison in *Letters of Fyodor Michailovich Dostoevsky*, p71. See also *Diary of a Writer*, p983, for a similar expression of the importance of an allegiance to Christ over and above any knowledge gained through sermons and the catechism.

<sup>46</sup> This somewhat romantic association of feeling and spirituality is confirmed in the later work *The Brothers Karamazov* where Zossima argues that "in some cases it really is much more admirable to give way to an emotion, [...] which springs from a great love, than not to give way to it at all". *The Brothers Karamazov*, p397, italics mine. I return to this point in my discussion of *The Brothers Karamazov* in Chapter 5.

<sup>47</sup> See Sergei Hackel in *New Essays*, Lubomir Radoyce's article (especially the section 'Duality and faith' pp104-120) and Roger Anderson's piece on carnival (pp458, 462) for further comment on Dostoyevsky's religious position. All three question the authenticity of Dostoyevsky's faith on grounds of its populist mysticism and ecclesiastical non-conformity, yet bypass the significance of Dostoyevsky's Christological confessions in diary and letters. Hackel suggests the teaching of characters like Zossima on the love of man, for instance, is "humanistic", but neglects to mention the teaching in I John that "he who says he loves God whom he has not seen but does not love his brother whom he has seen is a liar".

presuppositions. Moreover, the ideas that are expounded so sincerely by Shatov (see, for example, Shatov's speech on pp254-255), who to some extent is Dostoyevsky's mouthpiece in the novel, become a weapon with which the author elsewhere rubbishes those of whom he disapproves. It is noticeable that victims of the author's pet hates are portrayed with little sympathy and reduced in some cases to derisory caricatures. There is an especially malicious piece of satire on Turgenev (accused by Dostoyevsky of being anti-Russian) in the character of Karmazinov, whose "clean little pink ears" are made to express smugness and a prissy ineffectualness.<sup>48</sup> The revolutionaries are allowed the occasional grace of inconsistency but on the whole their portraits are equally unflattering (see, for example, p394) and Peter Verkhovsensky, who organizes the disturbances, is given a serpent's tongue. (p188) The haste to simplify and condemn is a danger to which a writer seeking to assert his favourite mental attitudes at all costs is prone, and represents as much a threat to critical inquiry as does the undercutting of all positions by a negative or acquiescent relativism.

Yet here, too, a chink in the novel's ideological armour is created by Shatov's comment on "that Virginsky woman" after she has come out in the middle of the night to assist his wife in childbirth, the same event that led to the ecstatic eulogy referred to earlier. Shatov's 'voice', in so far as he shares Dostoyevsky's religious persuasions and hesitations ("I-I shall believe"), is arguably the one closest to the author's own in the novel. Yet Shatov comes to the conclusion that he has misjudged Mrs Virginsky, a member of the revolutionary organisation from which he himself has recently defected. There is no concession made to the validity of her ideological position, but rather, a bypassing of the whole question of ideological position in the perception of her value as a person and of his own human limitations:

'So these people possess some generosity after all [...] A man and his convictions are two different things. Perhaps I haven't been fair to them. We are all to blame, we are all to blame and — if only we were all convinced of that!' (p580)

Shatov thus makes a distinction between the person and her ideas, and he does so in the name of a more fundamental principle, namely, corporate responsibility in the face of human error and fallibility. This is an important acknowledgement in terms of the explicitly moral and religious dimension in the novel because it allows for the possibility that the most cherished beliefs may still be imperfectly, and eccentrically, understood.

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<sup>48</sup> p98. It is intriguing that Nabokov, who was astringently critical of the simplifications involved in Dostoyevsky's characters when en route to conversion, is not averse to the simplifications involved in Karmazinov's portrait, which he finds one of the more convincing in Dostoyevsky's gallery. See *Lectures on Russian Literature*, pp109-129.

It also provides a different perspective from which the characters' ideological differences may be viewed: namely, their common need and vulnerability. For the sake of a "few words" with Stavrogin, Shatov appeals to the humanity that underwrites their differences:

I ask to be treated with respect — I demand it ! [...] Not respect for my personality — to hell with it ! — but for something else, just this once, just for a few words. We are two human beings and we've met in infinity [...] Drop your tone and speak like a human being ! (252)

Through an affirmation of life and its sanctity, therefore, regardless of a person's ideological position, and through express reservations about the assumptions and preoccupations that might shape that position, Dostoyevsky maintains a "polyphonic" openness in a novel that is ethically and metaphysically informed. Perhaps, at the same time, this acknowledgement of the individual limitations that shape one's own perspective may be interpreted as a way of affirming a visionary criterion that is many-sided without being relativistic. An insight one Russian Orthodox theologian has expressed in the following terms:

in the age to come "Christ will behold all the numberless myriads of saints, turning his glance away from none, so that to each one of them it will seem that He is looking at him, talking with him, and greeting him", and yet "while remaining unchanged, He will seem different to one and different to another" — so likewise out of eternity God [...] to each one [...] manifests Himself in a different way.<sup>49</sup>

The many perspectives of human 'polyphony' are contained and reflected back through the one light in Florovsky's metaphor. But if all the contradictions, eccentricities and heresies in Dostoyevsky reflect the same need for this "light" — what Dostoyevsky, from his own experiential standpoint, calls the "Russian Saviour, and the Russian God"—<sup>50</sup> then polyphony in Dostoyevsky nonetheless refers to a more authoritative judgement than is envisaged by Bakhtin.

### *Notes from Underground*

#### III.i. The reason "que la raison connaît point"

Chapter 1 of Dostoyevsky's narrative is more of a monologue than a polyphony of voices.

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<sup>49</sup> *Creation and Redemption*, Florovsky quoting Saint Symeon, pp72-73.

<sup>50</sup> Letter to Maikov, *Letters of Fyodor Michailovitch Dostoevsky to his Family and Friends*, p158.

There is no genuine discussion of opposing views, no evidence of a struggle for supremacy between what Bakhtin calls 'ideolectes'. Different theories of human nature and history are referred to in the narrative but the references are generalized and the interpretation of them very much the narrator's own. One could argue that the narrator's consciousness is dialogized as he "looks in all the mirrors of others' consciousness",<sup>51</sup> calculating the responses of an imaginary audience to his soliloquies. But in so far as this 'other' is likewise allotted a subservient role in the narrator's script this, too, reads as rhetorical flourishing on the narrator's part rather than as an appeal to a distinctly other voice. The narrator's consciousness, as a result, cannot be said to be fully dialogized. There is, however, an important dialogical tension in part I which derives from an opening of the floodgates of consciousness to an anarchic creative energy in the narrator himself. The sweeping negatives concerning other positions (discussed in Chapter 1 of the thesis), all implicitly refer to this force: the value that is not a value, the "best and greatest good" that is beyond reason and beyond, it would seem, the determinations of language also.

A preliminary definition of terms of reference in the narrative marks its departure from the preoccupations of Pyrrhonist scepticism and the nature of the Pyrrhonist's doubts. For the Pyrrhonist sceptic is commonly understood to have challenged his opponents on rational grounds and to have advocated moderation of feeling and behaviour as sensible criteria for living. Uncertainty and the suspension of his judgement are the consequences of a rational process and the exercise, as Hallie phrases it, of "a set of argumentative techniques strong enough to enable him to refute all opinions held by anyone".<sup>52</sup> By contrast, Dostoyevsky's narrator arrives at uncertainty through a response to that which is beyond and even opposed to reason, and in so far as his response is characterized by an unruly discontent, uncertainty and its effects in the narrative differ sharply from the ancient Greek sceptic's practical criterion as well as from his methods.

The dissatisfaction with reason that is the first indication of this alternative criterion is evident in the underground man's reading of history, which he believes confirms his suspicion that man is not a preeminently rational animal:

[...] cast a glance over the history of mankind: what do you see? Sublimity? [...] Variety? [...] Monotony? [...] In short, anything can be said of world history, anything conceivable even by the most disordered imagination. There is only one thing that you can't say — that it had anything to do with reason. (p37)

Rational argument, then, is rejected as an appropriate methodology for understanding

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<sup>51</sup> As Bakhtin does in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, pp42-43.

<sup>52</sup> *Sextus Empiricus. Selections from the Major Writings*, px.

human experience, and reason is denied its privileged position as a source of enlightened critique illuminating the system from a point outside it. In fact the narrator implies that reason is inadequate to delineate anything but a limited field of inquiry and is frequently constitutive of the problems it attempts to illuminate. For reason helps constitute the systems which mediate experience for us. Reason, he maintains, obscures and diverts where it intends to disclose and instruct. Thus where Sextus Empiricus is prepared to doubt his own arguments ("We declare at the outset that we do not make any positive assertion that anything we shall say is wholly as we affirm it to be"),<sup>53</sup> Dostoyevsky's narrator doubts the usefulness of arguments, which explain, contain, exclude, and, he maintains, falsify:

[...] man is so partial to systems and abstract deductions that in order to justify his logic he is prepared to distort the truth intentionally. (p31)

So what is the "truth" that is in danger of being distorted here? A suspicion of rational argumentation in *Notes* is in many ways consistent with the use of images and emotion in *The Devils* to represent the voice of faith. Images, in the latter instance, frequently act as more powerful communicators of the sanctity of life than doctrinaire speechifying. But the metaphysical questions of the later novel are not addressed in *Notes*, at least, not in the text as we know it. The discomfort with rationality, though characteristically Dostoyevskyeen, must therefore be considered outside any specifically theological or moral framework.

After much prevarication, this 'other' of the narrator's rhetoric that is also his criterion for refutation is referred to as "caprice", although the concept remains as elusive for the narrator to define as it is for the critic to translate.<sup>54</sup> On p33 the underground man describes this "best and greatest good" that nonetheless defies analysis as:

One's own free and unfettered volition, one's own caprice, however wild, one's own fancy, inflamed sometimes to the point of madness [...]

Caprice, volition, self-will, then, appear to be representative terms for a form of wayward inventiveness which, like the discourse of Mr Verkhovensky in *The Devils*, manifests itself in a rhetoric that is both devious and contradictory:

It would be better if I believed even a small part of everything I have written

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<sup>53</sup> p31.

<sup>54</sup> See Julia Annas's remarks on this in 'Action and character in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*.

here. I swear, gentlemen, I don't believe a word, not one single little word, of all I have scribbled down. That is, I do perhaps believe it, but at the same time, I don't know why, I feel or suspect, that I'm lying like a trooper. (p44)

But caprice is not merely an affair of a calculated artfulness, for it has unpredictable consequences for those who follow through its promptings. It simply will not "fit into any classification" of appropriate responses. Those who choose to ignore it on this account, however, are even more defenceless against its intrusions, since its omission, says the narrator, always sends "all systems and theories to the devil". (p34) Hence the double function of "caprice" as both critique and creativity in relation to more socially acceptable discourse.

### III. ii. "L'innommable": naming the unnameable

Others besides the narrator have played with what has come to be thought of as a contemporary project, in other words, naming the unnameable, writing to erase, or, less evasively, attempting to account for that which can be neither systematized nor ignored as a force in the creative process. The narrator's preoccupation with something which cannot be defined, his restlessness and impatience of limits can, in fact, be interpreted in relation to several already familiar frames of reference. Romanticism is one of these. For the romantic is commonly conceived as one who makes a virtue of the ineffable, and who seeks beyond the boundaries of the finite for a more sublime space in which to think and dream. This finds a correspondence in the narrator's longing for "something different, entirely different, which I am eager for, but which I shall never find." (p43)<sup>55</sup> Victor Terras points to the defence of the "irrational and intuitive principle against the rational and intellectual" in Dostoyevsky, as evidence of his romanticism (in the "broad anthropological" meaning of the term).<sup>56</sup> Although Terras mentions *Notes* only in passing, there is, as I have already indicated, a concerted defence of the non-rational in the novella fundamental to the narrator's problematic criteria, which could, for this reason, be called 'romantic'.

The rubric of romanticism is unsatisfactory, however. The deceits and prevarications of the underground man are at odds with the bias towards "intuitive goodness and wisdom" Terras identifies as a complementary attribute of the romantic-irrational principle in

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<sup>55</sup> M.H Abrams makes a combined yearning and striving for something other a defining feature of the romantic, with whom "Humanity's unquenchable aspirations beyond its limits [...] became humanity's chief glory and triumph over the pettiness of circumstance". (*A Glossary of Literary Terms*, p116)

<sup>56</sup> 'Dostoevskij's aesthetics in its relationship to romanticism', p21.



Dostoyevsky.<sup>57</sup> In addition, the disparaging references in Part II to the Rousseauesque “homme de la nature et de la vérité” (p63) and the narrator’s indulgence in “a lot of European, George-Sandish, ineffably noble and subtle nonsense”, (p107) suggest a certain irritability on the narrator’s part with the sublimity and grandeur frequently accompanying the Romantic concept of infinitude.<sup>58</sup> Dostoyevsky’s narrator, it must be remembered, is the man who whinges for weeks on end with toothache.

This is where the post-modern fascination with the unnameable, a potentially more elusive concept than romantic sublimity, appears to offer some more appropriate reference points for Dostoyevsky’s narrator’s criterion. Derrida’s “unnameable” in the essay on ‘La différence’, the “jeu qui fait qu’il y a des effets nominaux”, is too consciously platitudinous a concept to suit the mysterious hints let fall by Dostoyevsky’s narrator about his wildcard.<sup>59</sup> Kristeva’s thinking on the semiotic, on the other hand, and particularly the psychology of the abject associated with it in *Pouvoirs de l’horreur*, yields some appropriate theoretical metaphors for *Notes from Underground* (more so than for *The Devils* with its metaphysical referent). In all of her works Kristeva could be said to address the problem of criteria “under erasure” as she attempts a reading of the desires and uncertainties that disrupt an ordered, rational existence. She writes of the “perte inaugurale” on which meaning and subjectivity are founded; the sense of lack which harks back to the separation at childhood from the realm of chaotic desires and instincts characterizing union with the mother.<sup>60</sup> Memory of this loss, she suggests, marks the subject with a permanent instability, in so far as the archaic drives may always reassert themselves, drawing the subject back to the place “où le sens s’effondre”. (p9) The underground man’s express love of chaos and destruction, like Mr Verkhovensky’s excitement over the fire, indicate, in a Kristevan context, a pull towards an instinctual, pre-verbal chaos. (p40) Kristeva calls this the abject in *Pouvoirs de l’horreur*, and she locates it not in the other but in the subject. The “unnamable” concerns an intra-textual drama as the subject:

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<sup>57</sup> p21.

<sup>58</sup> Note that on pp49-50, the narrator, while seeming to invite a comparison with romanticism, is quick to dissociate himself from German and French romantics with their “transcendental souls”.

<sup>59</sup> “‘Il n’y a pas de nom pour cela’: lire cette proposition en sa *platitude*. Cet innommable n’est pas un être ineffable dont aucun nom ne pourrait s’approcher: Dieu, par exemple. Cet innommable est le jeu qui fait qu’il y a des effets nominaux, des structures relativement unitaires ou atomiques qu’on appelle noms, des chaînes de substitutions de noms, et dans lesquelles, par exemple, l’effet nominal ‘différance’ est lui-même entraîné, emporté, réinscrit [...]”. (*Marges de la philosophie*, p28) Elsewhere Derrida’s comments on the other of language are more suggestive without, however, his resorting to metaphors of ‘depth’. (See, for example, the interview in *Dialogues* with Richard Kearney.)

<sup>60</sup> *Pouvoirs de l’horreur*, p12.

"[...] las de ses vaines tentatives de se reconnaître hors de soi, le sujet trouve l'impossible en lui-même: lorsqu'il trouve que l'impossible, c'est son être même, découvrant qu'il n'est autre qu'abjet. (p12)

The sense of incompleteness and revolt in *Notes* that is dissociated from a transcendent or visionary ideal may thus be accounted for in psychoanalytic terms.

The description of the experience of abjection in Kristeva, like the account of the disruptive energies of the semiotic in *Desire in Language* are, to my mind, convincing theoretical models for the slippage towards unreason and mayhem in Dostoyevsky's 1864 narrative. But I would, again, endorse a Kristevan reading only with certain reservations. The explanatory core on which Kristeva's analysis is based necessitates acceptance of the role played by a particular moment in the subjects' history, and of Kristeva's interpretation of this event. Kristeva's "unnamable" relies for its coherence on a particular extra-textual referent that Dostoyevsky's *Notes* does not explicitly, or even coyly, recommend, any more than it does a theological referent. Furthermore, Kristeva's response as a psychoanalyst to the phenomenon of abjection envisages a form of art-as-therapy for naming and expurgating chaos. Art, in which anarchy is more readily expressed than in other forms of discourse, is thought capable of sublimating the chaos it unleashes.<sup>61</sup>

In *Notes from Underground*, however, no such relief is envisaged. The narrator's art turns back on itself and shouts its hollowness and dissatisfaction ("My jokes are in bad taste [...] uneven, confused, full of self-distrust"), (p25) while at the end of the work the narrator professes to a sense of shame rather than catharsis after pouring his petty confessions into an imagined readerly ear. (p122) There is a quality of gnawing, grumbling pain, as well as revolt, in the narrator's protests and a paradoxical reluctance to abandon certain questions even while refusing any known framework in which they might be better understood. ("Gentlemen, of course I'm joking [...] but you know you mustn't take everything I say for a joke. I may be joking with clenched teeth. Gentlemen, there are some questions that torment me [...]"). (p39) Like Beckett's narrator in *L'innommable* the voice from the underground keeps on keeping on, yet without having been relieved of its burden, "sans espoir de trêve, sans espoir de crêve". Despite admitting to the ambivalent tastes of the masochist, who extracts pleasure from pain, the narrator is left lacerating a wound that, in the end, aches dully and stupidly, and without the dizzying release of

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<sup>61</sup> "Les diverses modalités de *purification* de l'abjet — les diverses catharsis — constituent l'histoire des religions, et s'achèvent dans cette catharsis — par excellence qu'est l'art, en deçà et au-delà de la religion. Vue sous cet angle, l'expérience artistique, enracinée dans l'abjet qu'elle dit et par là même purifie, apparaît comme la composante essentielle de la religiosité". (p25)

Kristeva's semiotic or object intoxications.

In addition, there is a sense in which the narrative exposes the limits of its criteria while inviting the reader to feel the full force of its criticisms. The "best and greatest good" which challenges systematic readings of experience with representations of their aridity, narrowness and abstractionism reveals, when reflected in the same mirror, a not dissimilar, stuffy artificiality:

After all, we don't even know where 'real life' is lived nowadays, or what it is, what name it goes by. Leave us to ourselves, without our books, and we at once get into a muddle and lose our way — we don't know whose side to be on or where to give our allegiance, what to love and what to hate, what to respect and what to despise. [...] Soon we shall invent a method of being born from an idea. (p123)

On the last page of the novella, where the above passage comes from, the underground man leaves the reader in considerable doubt as to the reliability of the criteria referred to in Part I. What has occurred in between the first section, with which the present chapter has been principally concerned, and the end of Part II, which I will consider more specifically in the following chapter, is of considerable significance in appreciating the ambivalence of the criterion the underground man is so reluctant to pin down. The 'Story of the Falling Sleet' (Chapter 2) makes clear that the crucial factor in the challenge to "systems and abstract deduction", (p31) is found not so much on the inter- or intratextual levels, but on the level of interpersonal relationships — something I believe is closer to the heart of Bakhtin's concerns than Kristeva's with her interest in the "impossible within".

Even in this least of metaphysical works, then, the reader seems to be led back to a contemplation of some form of transcendent criterion, if not the "Archimedean point" scepticism and postmodernism deny. The criterion that is despairingly and playfully elusive in Part I of the novella acquires momentary definition in the narrator's encounter with Liza in the 'Story of the Falling Sleet'. Here it is grounded not in the psyche nor in the polyphonic clash and blend of ideas, but at the crossroads of self and other. This by no means excludes the idea of loss as the ground of being. But it gives the experience of loss an orientation and a responsibility. I wish to take up this theme in Chapter 3. Nevertheless, it is the aspect of Dostoyevsky's criterion which will ultimately place his more 'semiotic' mode in perspective. The search for something "I shall never find" marks all of Dostoyevsky's oeuvre but the potential for destruction and introverted abstractionism accompanying this 'search' is placed in corrective tension with the criterion of truth-as-relationships, briefly experienced but not acknowledged by the narrator of *Notes from Underground*.

IV. i. Invention and the *mise en question* of contemporary mythology

Images of violence and a surreal urbanism translate the question of the criterion in *Projet* into a very different context to the one provided by *Notes from Underground*. Likewise the peevishness of Dostoyevsky's narrator and the uneven texture of his prose are flattened in the twentieth-century text into a series of well-ordered units in which characters and scenes function as "les éléments nécessaires d'une machinerie bien huilée". (p7) In both their style and preoccupations, the two narratives seem to hail from imaginary worlds that are fundamentally alien to one another.

Despite their dissimilarities, however, the novels are structured on the basis of a common principle. More precisely, Dostoyevsky's underground narrative and Robbe-Grillet's urban underworld derive from a similar protest against the limitations of a rationalist framework and desire for greater scope for invention. In *Projet's* "avis au lecteur" (an extract from an article by the author) we find Dostoyevsky's exaltation of caprice defended in more prosaic terms:

Après la faillite de l'ordre divin (de la société bourgeoise) et, à sa suite, de l'ordre rationaliste (du socialisme bureaucratique), il faut pourtant comprendre que seules des organisations ludiques demeurent désormais possibles.

In other words, the metanarratives of metaphysics and rationality are rejected in the transformation of the novel into a playground. As is obvious from essays and interviews, Robbe-Grillet makes this playground representative of the imaginative freedom which is the novelists' criterion in relation to other discourses. The "parole ludique" is the New Novelist's version of the "best and greatest good" that "sends all systems and theories to the devil", the disorder that counters order, the revolution that declines to align itself with any political programme.

Robbe-Grillet's "parole ludique" in *Projet* is an ambivalent concept at once conservative and experimental in its relationship to other discourses. For in the attempt to be free of restrictions, ludism withdraws from social engagement into a highly privatized space. In doing so, however, it is no longer in a position to challenge the system and is acquiescent by default to its laws. As already indicated in the introduction to this chapter Robbe-Grillet's essays and addresses reflect this difficulty, the need for escape battling it out with the desire to confront and be taken seriously. That Robbe-Grillet has

in mind some form of confrontation between his own and society's discourse in *Projet*, however, seems clear from his prefatory remarks. Describing the assemblage of narrative material for the work he relates:

Lorsque je lis les faits divers scandaleux ou criminels, lorsque je regarde les vitrines et les affiches qui composent la façade de toute grande ville, lorsque j'accomplis un parcours dans les couloirs du métropolitain, je me trouve assailli par une multitude de signes dont l'ensemble constitue la mythologie du monde où je vis, quelque chose comme l'inconscient collectif de la société, c'est-à-dire à la fois l'image qu'elle veut se donner d'elle-même et le reflet des troubles qui la hantent.

Robbe-Grillet thus validates his narrative material by pointing out its correspondence with certain already familiar signs and images in the world around him. This is a line of argument which might be adopted by a realist writer, although Robbe-Grillet departs from the realist project when he indicates his intention to subvert rather than reflect society's discourse about the "monde où [il] vis". Subversion is to be accomplished by an exposure of the contrived nature of that discourse as Robbe-Grillet fragments and rearranges its separate elements so as to undermine the authority of its coherence as a totality. What we call 'reality' is to be revealed as a procession of socially constructed stereotypes, a triumph, as Roland Barthes would say, of artifice rather than 'truth':

Désignées en pleine lumière comme stéréotypes, ces images ne fonctionnent plus comme les pièges du moment qu'elles seront reprises par un discours vivant, qui reste le seul espace de ma liberté.

The revolutionary potential of ludism is now clarified. Through mockery of discourses that purport to represent the world, formalist play is to show all such discourse to be simply "une création humaine, qu'une autre création humaine peut détruire",<sup>62</sup> thus freeing author and reader alike to embark on their own interpretative adventures, free of the ponderous grid of traditional frameworks.

#### IV. ii. The *parole ludique* in action: a dialogue between texts?

Two discourses that are caught up in formal play in *Projet* are those of the crime thriller and the pornography industry respectively. It is the second which is more representative of the socio-cultural sphere referred to in the preface, and the second, too, which has elicited most comment from critics. But the two 'mythologies' are closely linked and reference to them in the narrative ensures something of the "correlation between texts" Kristeva associates with the "ambivalent word" of the novel. Because Robbe-Grillet's

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<sup>62</sup> *Nouveau roman; hier, aujourd'hui*, p97.

chief method of responding to other discourses is through stylistic permutations *Projet* could be said to correspond to the first category of “ambivalent words” Kristeva discusses in *Desire in Language*, namely, that of stylizing effects. As Kristeva explains:

Stylizing effects establish a distance with regard to the word of another [...]. This category of ambivalent words is characterized by the writer's exploitation of another's speech — without running counter to its thought — for his own purposes; he follows its direction while relativizing it.<sup>63</sup>

To the extent that it incorporates different styles of writing and enters into critical dialogue with them, the narrative of *Projet* approaches this level of ambivalence. For each ‘text’ theoretically challenges the authority of the other and relativizes the habits of perception it represents.

A challenge to our perceptual habits is implicit in Robbe-Grillet's games with the thriller genre. One of his principle techniques of subversion in this regard is the use of rapid changes in narrative perspective, as on pp22-23, for example, where the principle ‘je’ narrator watching his pursuers becomes, without warning, a “silhouette fuyante” watched by them. This mutability in narrative voice has the effect of weakening any sense of a unique event with a correspondingly unique meaning. What ‘really’ happens is not a single but a multiple phenomenon as something slightly different is seen and told by each narrative voice when it takes up the tale. Since none of the voices has the superhuman knowledge of the popular detective, there is no-one to explain the significance of puzzling details which must therefore remain in pointillist suspension unless blended by a readerly eye. What, for instance, is the rapport “entre cette méfiance compréhensible et le geste ambigu ébauché par l'autre personnage”? the narrator wonders. (p22) As every narrator, including this one, is engaged in the pursuit of his own imaginary enemies and fetishes, the other's gesture is of no relevance to him until he makes it otherwise, mentally appropriating it to fit his own adventure. Such an emphasis on subjective mind shakes the reader's confidence in the idea of a reality commonly understood and shared by all. When we think we are engaged in meaningful social transactions, the novel implies, we may likewise be engaged merely in some ludic activity of our own.

Chases, escapes and other trappings of the crime-thriller novel, however, provide little more than atmosphere and pace in comparison with the sado-erotic material which dominates the book. This, it would seem, is the “multitudes de signes” of the preface, the “multitude” being more indicative of the number of times this sign is referred to than of

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<sup>63</sup> *Desire in Language*, p73.

any variety in the sign itself. But, as Robbe-Grillet explains, eroticism is one of the images which haunt the collective consciousness, and as such, it is part of the contemporary mythology he is concerned to address, while distancing himself through the teasing mockeries of the "parole ludique".

Some of the games Robbe-Grillet plays to break the power of the pornographic myth employ the techniques of discontinuity, humour and theatricality. By designating a formal interruption in the middle of a torture session, for example, the narrative de-realizes the sadism involved and counters guilty fear with laughter. Asking for a refreshment break in the middle of proceedings ("entre les deux parties du programme, vous devrez me servir à boire et me préparer une collation: des oeufs au jambon, par exemple"), (p99) JR's executioner transforms the affair into something ludic and ludicrous, as if inviting derision of the salacious nature of the episode. Constant references to the novel's aesthetic machinery, to scenes, masks and theatre, create additional distancing effects, indicating that the fantasy world in which readers are invited to indulge is also carefully controlled in order that, as the preface informs us, "ces images ne fonctionnent plus comme les pièges".

#### IV. iv. Revolution or complicity?

Just how far Robbe-Grillet does, in fact, avoid these traps (and encourage his readers to do likewise) is a subject of contention amongst critics. Whereas most seem to agree on the importance of the freeplay of the imagination as a principle in Robbe-Grillet, not all see his treatment of sado-erotic material in *Projet* as convincing practice of either imaginative freedom or critical engagement.

Leki and Stoltzfus both accept the author's reading of the sado-erotic discourse in the novel which is, essentially, that once placed in the context of aesthetic play it becomes ideologically and morally innocuous and susceptible of manipulation by author and reader alike. Leki reiterates Robbe-Grillet's claims about the inherently subversive nature of experimental texts, noting that "the only revolution to which a writer can contribute is not a change in government but a change in the manner of perceiving the world."<sup>64</sup> Her assessment of violent sexuality in *Projet* accords with the author's remarks in the preface to the novel, and with the narrative's own designation of its revolutionary triptych — "le viol, l'incendie, le meurtre" — as "actions libératrices majeures" in a formalist playground:

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<sup>64</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, p98.

Rather than allowing the overwhelming city to crush him, Robbe-Grillet chooses to recognize that the city's hold on him is one of mythology, of billboard posters; he too can play the game and control the city by controlling its mythology and using that mythology for his own ends.<sup>65</sup>

Ben Stoltzfus similarly judges that the work's experimental nature is a means of gaining control over its thematic preoccupations and that *Projet* thus succeeds in affirming:

different values, setting up a dialogue between the self and the other, between the subconscious (imagination) and language (the establishment), between the inside and the outside.<sup>66</sup>

Both critics assume that the emphasis on the fantastic nature of sado-erotic images and the formal dislocations to which these are subject are adequate means of 'revolutionizing' the myth involved.

Other critics dispute this. Suleiman, Kryssing-Berg and Clayton all judge the work to be complicitous rather than revolutionary in its relation to contemporary mythology. In their eyes the novel's formal experiments are little more than that, namely, formal games which effect no significant changes on the material borrowed from society's "langue", and which therefore accord only too well with Robbe-Grillet's assertion that form is not answerable to signification ("Ne pourrait-on avancer au contraire que le véritable écrivain n'a rien à dire? Il a seulement une manière de dire.")<sup>67</sup> Their principle objection is that the novel's obsession with one "myth" to the exclusion of others and the predictable way in which it is treated (the victims are always young and beautiful, always constrained, always prettily marked with blood, always timorous yet complaisant), argue a high degree of complacency and a notable absence of the ambivalence that might be expected to characterize the subversive text. Suleiman remarks that "every single sequence is centered around a sado-erotic event",<sup>68</sup> and concludes, with reference to the novels' affinity with Sadean fantasies:

Viewed in the light of the Sadean intertext, *Projet pour une révolution à New York* takes on a curiously nonsubversive aspect. Far from deconstructing male fantasies of omnipotence and total control over passive female bodies, *Projet* repeats them with astonishing fidelity.<sup>69</sup>

Kryssing-Berg makes a similar comment regarding the repetitious nature of the text's material and the author's failure to represent different perspectives or even liberate his

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<sup>65</sup> p108.

<sup>66</sup> *The Body of the Text*, p147.

<sup>67</sup> *Pour un nouveau roman*, p42.

<sup>68</sup> *Subversive Intent*, p59.

<sup>69</sup> p67.



narrative from the one with which it is mainly preoccupied:

Pourquoi dire et redire dans toutes ses interviews que, pour lui, l'artiste, en créant, se purge de ses propres fantasmes, et, en même temps, libère le lecteur ou le spectateur, alors que la valeur thérapeutique de cette création est niée par la circularité du roman? <sup>70</sup>

Clayton goes one step further when he suggests that the formal changes, or textual revolutions, in the novel are themselves an extension of the ideological complacency Suleiman and Kryssing-Berg refer to, the rigid theatricality of narrative material negating the changeability implicit in creativity as well as life:

Robbe-Grillet takes us into an aestheticized world outside of change — not a world of human creativity at all.<sup>71</sup>

My own reading of the novel tends to confirm these criticisms. Touches of humour provide some light relief but not the refreshment of a change of perspective. The fragmentation of sado-erotic scenes has a similarly limited impact because the latter are replayed so often the effect is the same as if they had never been broken off at all. As the sado-erotic myth is concentrated on to the near-exclusion of others, the failure to undermine its meaning is all the more obvious. (Note especially the series of snapshot scenes towards the end of the novel, pp203-214, each of which is interrupted with the word "coupure", but each of which develops a thread of the same mega-narrative.)

To the reservations of Suleiman, Kryssing-Berg and Clayton, I would add the novel's treatment of potentially resistant readers, and its reliance on self-reference within the Robbe-Grillet corpus as a substitute for extended dialogue with other texts.<sup>72</sup> Suleiman

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<sup>70</sup> 'Onirisme et voyeurisme dans *Projet pour une révolution à New York* d'Alain Robbe-Grillet', p12.

<sup>71</sup> 'The Aesthetics of sado-masochism', p116.

<sup>72</sup> For further comment on the problem of complicity in the mythology Robbe-Grillet purports to subvert see Leslie Hill's article, 'Robbe-Grillet: formalism and its discontents', which takes a critical stance on the subject, and Raylene Ramsay's article (see O'Callaghan) 'The sadist and the siren. Modern myth in the writing of Alain Robbe-Grillet', which is more cautious. Ramsay asks whether Robbe-Grillet's game is "in fact the [...] liberation he claims", or whether it is rather the "demonstration of an imprisonment?", going on to suggest that the bi-sexual characters in *Djinn* and *Topologie* are one way in which Robbe-Grillet would parry such an accusation. In her 1992 book on Robbe-Grillet, Ramsay raises an important point when she writes "we need to know more about the alternatives to a cerebral, controlled masculine erotic and the kinds of "liberating" forms the flow of feminine desire might take before we condemn the former in favour of the latter. As yet feminine desires have remained elusive, and it is not clear that they can be defined without reference to the masculine desires in power." (*Robbe-Grillet and*

mentions the dialogues in the novel between the narrator and a “hypothetical reader” and judges their main effect to be one of de-realizing the text (“The effect of these dialogues [...] is to “de-realize” the fiction and to insert the problem of the *reading* of the text into the very space of its unfolding”).<sup>73</sup> In my view, however, a chief purpose of these dialogues is to anticipate and out-manceuvre readerly criticism, thus protecting the narrative from a dialogue that might undermine its *raison d’être* by introducing undesirable levels of ambivalence into its coded obscurities.<sup>74</sup> Even the text’s humour is sometimes employed as a method of controlling the reader/text dialogue. The self-parody implicit in the little girl’s dismissal of the taped porn drama “ils disent toujours la même chose”, (p65) and her bored “Oh ça alors”, (p67) deflate readerly scorn by giving the text the first laugh at its own foibles. But it is the mock reader/narrator interrogation in which the novel is put on trial that constitutes the text’s real “*pièce de résistance*” in this regard.

A cross-examination of the novel by the novel would seem a means of fulfilling the ultimate requirement of the subversive text, namely, its own self-questioning. In this case, however, self-questioning is only a more concerted attempt by the ‘text’ to justify itself and defend itself from censure. Objections to the narrator’s obsession with sado-erotics — “N’avez-vous pas tendance à trop insister [...] sur l’aspect érotique des scènes rapportées?” — (pp188-189) are countered with the suggestion that a lot more could have been said that was, in fact, discreetly omitted. Criticism is further parried with the hint that it is the hypothetical reader who is placing too much importance on these scenes, (p191) and so the reader who is guilty of seeking titillation where none is intended. The exchange between narrator and reader is little more than a monologue, as are the exchanges between the male torturers and their female victims in the novel. In both cases, the novels’ themes of “Le viol, l’assassinat, l’incendie” (p153) are presented as the fulfilment of the desires (explicit or unavowed) of both parties.

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*Modernity*, p170)

In support of this implicit reservation is a recent *Express* article which suggests that: “La littérature érotique n’est plus la seule affaire du sexe fort” but comes, rather, with “un seul message aux hommes: Je suis ton objet, mais, en retour, tu es aussi le mien”. (‘Sur le papier couchées...’, pp60-61) I am not convinced, however, that the phenomenon of mutual complicity such an article highlights absolves Robbe-Grillet from accusations of manic repetitiveness and ideological complacency in his 1970 novel. The novel provokes other objections besides gender-based ones.

<sup>73</sup> *Subversive Intent*, pp59-60.

<sup>74</sup> In his article, ‘The interrogation of the narrator in Robbe-Grillet’s *Project for a revolution in New York*’, Deneau does not go so far as this, suggesting simply that the “interrogation sequences” represent “a firm assertion” of the author’s “right to record sado-erotic material” and a “built-in method of speaking or responding to some of Robbe-Grillet’s less friendly readers”. (p8)

The novel's use of intertextual references only adds to the insularity promoted by the reader/text dialogue. Although there is indirect reference to other literary conventions (the crime-thriller genre is the most obvious of these), the series of references to other Robbe-Grillet works are more readily identifiable with the result that the norms of the primary text are tacitly reinforced. The sado-erotic content in *Projet* refers readers to similar passages in *Le voyeur*, where sado-erotics is subtly underplayed, and to *La maison de rendez-vous*, where it is not. Reference is specifically made to the "Villa Bleue" from *Maison* on p33, while Laura is a variant of Lauren/Lorraine from the same novel. Manneret is common to both *Projet* and *Maison*, Frank recalls the Franck from *La jalousie* and Doctor Morgan from *Projet* appears in the later novel *Djinn*. With the exception of *Djinn*, all the texts referred to rework a similar sado-erotic thematics. This is why William F. Van Wert's comments on intertextuality in Robbe-Grillet's *Topologie pour une cité fantôme*, a similar work from the point of view of narrative material, seem inappropriate to the use of intertextuality in *Projet*:

we can see that Robbe-Grillet's intertextuality is not mere narcissism or simple redundancy, but rather a game played in dead earnest with his readers/listeners/spectators. [...] what appears to be self-indulgent repetition or self-allusion really engenders new meaning or "recuperates" old meanings.<sup>75</sup>

In *Projet*, however, new meanings are old meanings and the game is one for which the author holds all the cards. The specific intertextual references in *Projet* are to different works that deal with the same themes and in a similar fashion, while the reader's ability to identify these represents the limits of her role in the game the author has invented, earnestly or otherwise.

For these reasons Robbe-Grillet's criterion in *Projet* is, in the final analysis, as different from Dostoyevsky's as are the trappings of mechanistic urbanism from the scrupulous discontent of the underground. Although Dostoyevsky's narrator is comparably insular in his response to others, including the hypothetical reader, his insularity is flawed due to an uneasiness with the random freedom that is his stated criterion. The narrator's discourse in *Notes* is intermittently shattered by awareness of "something different, entirely different", and an impulse towards this "something different" makes the notion of "caprice" more ambivalent than Robbe-Grillet's "invention du monde et de l'homme" in *Projet*. Although he challenges society's utilitarianism with reminders of the need for creativity, Robbe-Grillet seems content to make this point and thereafter ignore any problems that might be inherent in the material used as counters on the playing-board. Such conservatism is more pervasive than that of the Pyrrhonian sceptic because it is

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<sup>75</sup> 'Intertextuality and redundant coherence in Robbe-Grillet', p253.

neither fully acknowledged nor critically informed.

If nothing matters but being able to play, Robbe-Grillet's criterion in *Projet* is better defined as evasive than as unnameable, and naïvely shocking than subversive. Kristeva's comments on the pseudo-transgressions of erotic literature are pertinent here since they allow for a distinction between the word which transgresses in order to affirm a value, albeit an indeterminate and puzzling one (such as the criterion in *Notes*), and the word which transgresses in order to shock the authority-figure and so proclaim its own perverse dependence on it:

In fact, this "transgression" of linguistic, logical, and social codes within the carnivalesque only exists and succeeds, of course, because it accepts *another law*. [...] We should particularly emphasize this specificity of dialogue as *transgression giving itself a law* so as to radically and categorically distinguish it from the pseudo-transgression evident in a certain modern "erotic" and parodic literature. The latter, seeing itself as "libertine" and "relativizing", operates according to a principle of *law anticipating its own transgression*.<sup>76</sup>

Thus the novel's revolutionary project founders because it fails to identify a criterion that is distinctly 'other' in relation to the object of criticism. Its acquiescent relativism derives not through the sceptical practice of attaching equal weight to different meanings, but through a continuum of the same meaning.

### *Le miroir qui revient*

#### V. i. "la nouvelle autobiographie"

si la contradiction interne [entre l'identité de l'autobiographe et son personnage] était volontairement choisie par l'auteur, elle n'aboutirait jamais à un texte qu'on lirait comme une autobiographie; ni vraiment comme un roman; mais à un jeu pirandellien d'ambiguïté.<sup>77</sup>

Robbe-Grillet's *Le miroir qui revient* is precisely the kind of generic changeling that Lejeune is referring to here. At once "une autobiographie" and "un roman" it demands a more flexible framework than that provided by either the conventional autobiography or novel form, offering its readers an interpretative guessing game in which reality takes on the appearance of fiction and vice versa. An important feature of this "jeu pirandellien", however, is that it avoids the uncritical flamboyance of a revolt for its own sake against recognized literary practice. If Robbe-Grillet transgresses the norms of autobiography, as Lejeune defines them, such as the division between the author as

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<sup>76</sup> *Desire in Language*, p71.

<sup>77</sup> *Le pacte autobiographique*, pp31-32.

writer and social citizen, the subscription to a code of realism, the promise to tell the truth,<sup>78</sup> it is because he wishes to make a different kind of autobiographical statement to the one usually sanctioned by the genre.

A book which may be read as conservative — Robbe-Grillet writing unequivocally at last of himself and his preoccupations — or as anarchic — Robbe-Grillet causing mayhem again by confusing fact and fiction — may alternatively be read as revolutionary, and in a manner in which *Projet pour une révolution à New York* is not. For unlike *Projet*, *Le miroir* initiates authentic dialogue between texts, a critical reading of another literary corpus which leads to a relativizing of the genre's legalism and a renewal of its forms. When Robbe-Grillet marks his departure from Lejeune's autobiographical formula he indicates that his digressions are in the interests of recasting the autobiographical thesis, rather than failing to address it through unavowed complicity or systematic negation. With reference to the second part of his autobiographical fiction, Robbe-Grillet explains:

je m'oppose très fermement aux thèses sur l'autobiographie de Lejeune par exemple qui insiste sur la cohérence obligatoire de l'autobiographie, sur son projet de cohérence. Certainement pas! L'autobiographie doit saisir la mouvance, se constituer de fragments qui bougent sans cesse. Comme il y a un 'nouveau roman', il faudra inventer une 'nouvelle autobiographie'.<sup>79</sup>

In this case the work is consistent with Robbe-Grillet's statements about it.

#### V. ii. Robbe-Grillet as autobiographical subject: "la dépouille du monstre"

Robbe-Grillet's identification with the autobiographical mode in *Le miroir* is sufficiently close to establish the common ground necessary for dialogue between texts, or, signifying-systems. Indeed, so cannily has the conventional discourse of autobiography been appropriated that Robbe-Grillet's ludic word seems to have been transformed into something cosily traditional in the process. As Jérôme Garcin describes this venture into semi-domestic terrain:

Finalement, Alain Robbe-Grillet est un homme touchant. Grosse tête et regard noir, cet Eléphant Man de la littérature objective [...] s'évertue à prouver qu'il a un cœur [...]. Avec le *Miroir qui revient*, Alain Robbe-Grillet publiait ses Mémoires, oui, ses Mémoires. Le statisticien disait 'je' comme vous et moi, il parlait de 'papa', de 'maman' et du grand-père cap-hornier [...].<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> pp33 and 36 respectively.

<sup>79</sup> 'Conversation avec Alain Robbe-Grillet', p91.

<sup>80</sup> p104.

In so far as Robbe-Grillet explicitly, and with evident pleasure, talks about himself in *Le miroir* he can be said to have fulfilled a basic requirement of the genre: that of self-reference. He even warns the reader that he is going to do this, namely, take up the traditional autobiographer's guise with all that implies of individualism, truth to the 'facts', poignant memories of past experiences. Even though he may describe this guise as "la dépouille" of an ideological monster he is intending to decapitate, (p11) he appears not always to shed the ideological skin with quite the alacrity we might expect. In setting out to subvert autobiography Robbe-Grillet cannot resist writing one himself.

In the course of his narrative, for example, we find quite banal autobiographical references to Robbe-Grillet's family members (his parents, grandparents, sister Anne-Lise and wife Catherine); to members of his profession (Barthes with whom Robbe-Grillet had a special affinity, Sartre and Camus whose works were valuable reference points for his own). There are anecdotes describing specific places and events, such as the family apartment in Brest, rue Cassendi; family holidays, successes at school, and early professional days with the Agricultural Institute before Robbe-Grillet's writing career was fully established. There is an account, too, of Robbe-Grillet's experiences in a German labour camp during the war, this last being a real-life event experienced by millions. All these things from the family or a wider social context give the work a verifiable realism that seems to set the seal on its authenticity as an autobiographical document.

In addition, giving the documented facts their prescribed air of intimacy, is the element of personal revelation accompanying them. Anecdotes and images are interrelated in such a way as to contribute to a coherent picture of the man, and one, moreover, that is witty, charming and sensitive. The trauma at having walked on a tiny fledgeling sparrow in the school playground, (pp200-201) and the sound years later of shattering glass and his wife's "cri d'oiseau blessé" when he broke the delicately tinted blue bottle she prized; (pp188-189) recurring nightmares as a child (p14) and the shock as an adult on discovering the monstrous other face of German military order; (p125) the meeting with critic Bruce Morrisette and the latter's theory about Robbe-Grillet's eccentric mother and conviction that Robbe-Grillet's formation in this respect was in accordance with the patterns of literary genius. (pp194-95) However gently self-mocking this last may be, like the rest of the anecdotal material in the book, it has a potentially explicative function in relation to the reader's understanding of Robbe-Grillet the author and essayist — the heightened visual sensitivity and accompanying morbid eroticism in the novels, the iconoclastic campaign against authority in the essays. Further, it has a justificatory function in relation to Robbe-Grillet the man, eliciting our sympathy and

liking. In the same way, then, that Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Confessions* demonstrates a need to win readers to his side and convince them of his innocence over the affair of Mlle Lambercier's combs, so Robbe-Grillet in *Le miroir* seems to seek readerly approval, admitting to the need to "me justifier" in the eyes of this anonymous but indispensable other. (p42)

On one level, therefore, it would seem the conditions of the "pacte autobiographique" have been fulfilled in that the "je" of the autobiographical narrative "renvoie au nom porté sur la couverture",<sup>81</sup> that Robbe-Grillet as subject and object of the autobiographical discourse is one and the same person.

### V. iii. The prism of fantasy

And yet, forestalling complacency on this count is the evident readiness of the Robbe-Grillet persona to assume different guises in the narrative. This effectively undermines the whole concept of Robbe-Grillet the man and the autobiographer as being "one and the same person". At one point, for example, Robbe-Grillet takes on the identity of Camus's narrator in *L'étranger*, rewriting the prison episode as if he were Meursault. (pp166-171) Members of Robbe-Grillet's family are made to pass through the same prism of fantasy, emerging refracted and double, no longer themselves. Robbe-Grillet creates a link, for example, between his grandfather and one of his own fictional characters, "le vieux roi Boris". (p33) Edouard Manneret, who is a reflection of the same character-type in *La maison de rendez-vous*, reappears in *Le miroir* in connection with Henri de Corinthe and, through him, with the autobiographer himself, indirectly represented at a desk working on material redolent of *Le voyeur*. (p218) Robbe-Grillet thus makes a circuitous but deliberate link between his grandfather's identity and his own through the intermediary figure of Corinthe. Into a reassuringly veracious context, therefore, elements of fiction are introduced, intermingling with the anecdotal material so as to transform it into the stuff of personal legend. So neatly, in fact, are reality and fiction dovetailed in the work that it is difficult to identify any personality unequivocally with one or other of these two dimensions. Several of the main protagonists, at least, are amphibious creatures, and it is the narrator's refusal to separate what are usually distinct categories that creates the kinds of generic problems identified in general terms by Lejeune.

One of the more significant ways in which the "romanesque" impinges on the autobiographical in *Le miroir* is through the aforementioned character of Henri de

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<sup>81</sup> *Le pacte autobiographique*, p27.

Corinthe. From the outset Corinthe is shrouded in mystery and the writer speculates whether his existence may not even be the product of his own inventive memory, “mensongère et travailleuse”. (p8) The fact that memories of his visits are the result of brief “entrevues comme entre les deux battants disjoints d’une porte accidentellement mal close”, enables a potential association with Robbe-Grillet’s novel *La jalousie*, where the narrator’s reliance on discontinuous vision forces him into complete dependence on his imagination. This implicit assertion of fictionality is repeated more explicitly when, discussing the family’s reception of this mysterious gentleman, it becomes clear they accord the same status to Corinthe’s “pâle fiancée” as to characters of fairytale such as the “Hollandais maudit”, an admission which is followed by the first of the strange, episodic tableaux which give the novel its title. (p20) The importance of Corinthe in determining the unorthodox nature of the work is, after all, foreshadowed in the opening pages where the autobiographer gives as his starting premiss not a revelation of his own character but an inquiry into the Corinthe persona. Who was Henri de Corinthe? Why did he visit the Robbe-Grillet family so often? Why was Robbe-Grillet as a small boy discouraged from approaching him?

Ce n’est probablement que dans le but — incertain — de donner à de telles questions ne serait-ce qu’un semblant de réponse, que j’ai entrepris il y a quelque temps déjà, de rédiger cette autobiographie. (p9)

The writer’s attention is, from the first, explicitly taken up with an imaginary character and not an autobiographical subject.

Once again, however, it is the crossover from fiction to ‘reality’ and back again, not the fictionalizing of the whole, that makes this autobiography-cum-novel so complex. Jean-Jacques Brochier has already noted the inquiries, prompted by the life-like quality of Henri de Corinthe, into likely historical counterparts. Henri de Kerillis and Henri Comte de Paris are two of the historical personages that have been designated as models for the Count — identities Robbe-Grillet himself suggests he may have confused with his own Henri de Corinthe. (p103) References to broken reports of Henri de Corinthe’s activities after World War II; (pp70-71) to articles about him in German newspapers; (p174) and to his photograph in Paris, (p175) are ploys which seem to tie this character back into the world of empirical and historical ‘reality’. The effect of this intersection of different discourses is to lend Henri de Corinthe a lifelike dimensionality while he, in turn, endows the discourse of realism with his own mythological status. He increases while it decreases in substantiality, and all the world of the narrative seems peopled with phantoms, the principle of whom is the autobiographer himself. Hence Robbe-Grillet’s response when asked why he wrote an autobiography:



Mais non, je n'ai pas écrit d'autobiographie, du moins au sens courant du terme. J'ai seulement, depuis *le Miroir qui revient*, bouleversé la donnée de mes recherches romanesques en y ajoutant un personnage qui s'appelle Alain Robbe-Grillet.<sup>82</sup>

#### V. iv. The criterion: the inventive activity of memory and "le réel"

The qualifying "du moins au sens courant du terme" may be emphasized, however, for it indicates an intent to revolutionize rather than reject out of hand the autobiographical genre, whose basic purpose is to inquire into what it means to be a person. Robbe-Grillet's investment in the autobiographical project in this fundamental sense is stated in his admission of the need to review the role of the personal in writing, "de s'interroger à nouveau sur le rôle ambigu que jouent, dans le récit moderne, la représentation du monde et l'expression d'une *personne*, qui est à la fois un corps, une projection intentionnelle et un inconscient". (p12) Some of the implications of this view of the personal will be worked through in subsequent chapters, but so far as *Le miroir* is concerned it is the active role played by the memory, one facet of intentional projection, and the interference from "le réel", linked to the world of the unconscious, that are the really significant factors in Robbe-Grillet's reformulation of the autobiographical thesis. Memory and the monsters of imagination represent Robbe-Grillet's criteria for both subverting the traditional genre and rewriting it according to a schema of his own. *Le miroir qui revient* is thus neither relativistic nor negatively dogmatic in its positing of a "nouvelle autobiographie".

The memory in *Le miroir qui revient* is what provides the clue to the double nature of some of its characters, at once people with a civil status in society and invented persona who play out different roles in their own and other people's imaginations. It is the memory which exposes the inadequacy of the narrow definitions of the personal permitted by social codes and practices and to which traditional autobiography to some measure defers.<sup>83</sup> The frayed ribbon of memory, discontinuous and worked over by the imagination, is what effectively constitutes the identity of Robbe-Grillet the man at the same time as it transforms him, with Henri de Corinthe, into a figure of fantasy. Although there are what might loosely be termed 'real' memories in *Le miroir*, these, like all memories, are imperfect, incomplete, and overlaid with different images and impressions over a period of time. It is well known that memory-loss deprives a person of identity, but it is what the mind and imagination make of memories that seems to be more significant in Robbe-Grillet's understanding of the personal than the gift of recall. After a passage of remembered childhood happiness meandering about Paris with his

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<sup>82</sup> *L'événement du Jeudi*, p105.

<sup>83</sup> See *Le pacte autobiographique*, p23.

mother, sampling new tastes, sights, and smells, Robbe-Grillet observes:

L'importance des choses — grêles saucisses aux aromates ou lampes électriques dissimulés au milieu des feuillages — ne réside évidemment pas dans leur signification intrinsèque, mais dans la façon dont elles ont marqué notre mémoire. (p177)

The memory is thus understood to be an active and not a passive faculty acting in isolation from others. It is as inescapably personal as identity itself to which it is inextricably linked. Memory, in association with the mind and imagination, assimilates images and experiences, reworking, transforming, interpreting, and most importantly, inventing. And if the autobiographer's identity in *Le miroir* is so constituted, other identities are likewise shown to be complex structures of "vrais souvenirs" and invented experience in relation to this principle 'phantom'. For since both real and invented characters are stored in the same "mémoire mensongère et travailleuse" and subject to its machinations, all acquire something of the mythological shimmer from which Corinthe emerges in the opening pages. Hence Robbe-Grillet's suggestion in *Le miroir* and in interviews about the work that characters from novels and films belong to the same world as members of his own family, particularly those, like his grandparents, furthest removed from him in time. From this it may be seen that the memory, which plays such a vital role in traditional autobiography, is equally vital to Robbe-Grillet's handling of the identity problem and so establishes a meeting point between conventional discourse and the "parole ludique". Robbe-Grillet's views on the memory as constantly interacting with the imagination are what permit him to be both Robbe-Grillet "l'homme" and Robbe-Grillet "le personnage", telling the story of his life and the fantasies of which it is composed, at the same time.

The importance of fantasy in the life of a person as well as a writer cannot be too greatly stressed in a reading of *Le miroir qui revient*. If the slightly phantasmagoric quality of the people in Robbe-Grillet's life draws attention to an important aspect of how the mind works, so the vitality of the imaginary characters from film and fiction referred to in *Le miroir* leads to consideration of the obscure world of dreams from which they emanate, a world the conscious mind can only begin to encompass. In *Angélique ou l'enchantement*, the second work in a proposed 'autobiographical' trilogy, Robbe-Grillet describes this unconscious aspect of the self, somewhat reluctantly, in terms of "le réel":

Et si une ressemblance avec le monde doit être recherchée, que cela soit du moins avec le réel, c'est-à-dire l'univers qu'affronte et secrète tout à la fois notre inconscient (déplacements de sens, confusions, imaginaire paradoxal, rêves, fantasmes sexuels, angoisses nocturnes ou éveillées...), et non pas avec le monde

factice de la quotidienneté, celui de la vie dite consciente, qui n'est que le produit froid et lénifiant de toutes nos censures: la morale, la raison, la logique, le respect de l'ordre établi. (p182)

Without embarking on any psychoanalytic analysis Robbe-Grillet nonetheless makes "le réel" an important reference point for his understanding of the personal in *Le miroir*. This 'other' of the conscious world of linguistic and social transactions provides constant interjections for which Robbe-Grillet leaves a sounding-space when representing himself and his family. "Le réel" is the source of the "monstres cachés" from the nightmares of childhood (p14) which crouch, still, at the borders of the "tableau hyper-réaliste" in the novels of adulthood. (p69) "Le réel" is a source of vulnerability in the armour of conscious poses and gestures that make up the public self (and, perhaps, the self of conventional autobiography prepared with the public in mind), and calls for a more fragmentary style of representation in both autobiography and novel. After sketching in some of his impressions of his grandfather, commenting on the persistent elusiveness of the 'essential' "grand-père Canu", Robbe-Grillet underlines the vulnerability of every human identity, not just to physical death, but also to "la mort qui hurle entre les points": (p27) in other words, the constant threat of disintegration experienced by a self which owes its existence in the "ordre établi" to the repression of the disturbing impulses, nameless fears and anxieties associated with "le réel".<sup>84</sup>

Robbe-Grillet's interest in "le réel" in his approach to the identity question enables some form of dialogue between this otherwise sophisticated and urbane text and Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*, which also struggles with the 'other' of "le langage articulé", with the desires and questionings that cannot always find appropriate expression in language or action. "Le réel" in *Le miroir qui revient* is for this reason closer to Dostoyevsky's "caprice" than the "parole ludique" in *Projet* which, for all its blatant capriciousness, is not so manifestly other to the conventional discourse with which it engages and which, in its slick aestheticism, lacks the disturbing, alluring quality, that sense, almost, of an elaborately staged failure in the face of the unnamable this reader finds in *Le miroir*. An orientation towards something other which is allowed, as it were,

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<sup>84</sup> The notion of a self constructed in relation to an "ordre établi" and vulnerable to interjections from "le réel" finds an echo in Kristeva and Lacan's view of the subject in psychoanalysis. Stoltzfus offers a brief Lacanian-inspired reading of Robbe-Grillet in his article, 'Towards bliss: Barthes, Lacan, and Robbe-Grillet', while Robbe-Grillet himself makes passing reference to Lacan in 'Robbe-Grillet: "Je n'ai jamais parlé d'autre chose que de moi": *Le Miroir qui revient* correspond au stade du miroir lacanien: l'enfant recolle ses morceaux dans la glace et s'aperçoit que l'image de lui-même est un autre!' (p6) A Lacanian reading of Robbe-Grillet, however, would have to consciously take into account the Robbe-Grillet "piège à psycho-machine" which the writer of *Le miroir qui revient* so obligingly points out to his readers.

to escape the intricately controlled patterning of Robbe-Grillet's "parole", even while these escapes are designated by that "parole" ("il me faut bien utiliser ce matériau-là, le langage, si inadapté soit-il, puisque c'est cette conscience claire [...] qui se plaint du non-sens et du manque"), (p41) also makes *Le miroir* more than a rehearsal of the inadequacy of language and the contrived nature of the sign-system through which we read the world. It is a highly personal text where the personal is bracketted, sceptically, in a series of questions, but not lost in consideration of the digressions offered by any linguistic system.

#### V. v. Footnote

It may not be too fanciful to suggest that Robbe-Grillet beats the traditional autobiographer at his own game in *Le miroir*, taking to even greater lengths his pursuit of the personal, the distinctly individual, the private. For on the one hand, there is the intriguing remark about the act of regicide committed by one of Robbe-Grillet's characters as being "une méthode sûre pour se faire reconnaître comme individu", (p46) a neat summation of one of Robbe-Grillet's possible motivations in the rebellion against the sometimes weighty authority of traditional literary and critical attitudes. The remark in *Le miroir* that "je n'ai jamais parlé d'autre chose que de moi" then acquires an added significance. To be himself, and to write about himself, Robbe-Grillet the individual *must* write against the traditional autobiographical project, with its air of chronological and confessional verity.

Seen in this light there is a sense in which Robbe-Grillet's challenge to one of the most hallowed assurances of the "pacte autobiographique" also builds on the instinct to affirm the personal over the anonymous that this pact presupposes. Lejeune makes one of the great attractions of the autobiographical genre the desire to "savoir le nom de l'auteur". He goes on to stipulate, "Qui m'empêcherait d'écrire l'autobiographie d'un personnage imaginaire et de la publier sous son nom, également imaginaire? [...] Cela est rare, parce qu'il est bien peu d'auteurs qui soient capables de renoncer à leur propre nom".<sup>85</sup> Robbe-Grillet is one who has carried off this renunciation with aplomb. But I wonder whether in his attitude to the proper name, with its implications of private ownership, Robbe-Grillet has not demonstrated a more subtle attachment to it? In common folklore, to know the name of someone is to have a measure of power over them, and even, in some stories, the power of life and death. The age-old superstition is something New Novelist Nathalie Sarraute revives with her conviction that to name something is to master and subdue it. Perhaps the very elusiveness of Robbe-Grillet's "nom propre" in the multiple

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<sup>85</sup> *Le pacte autobiographique*, p27.

changes of identity in *Le miroir*, arises from his desire not to make others too free of something that is his. Revolt against the autobiographical genre is a means of being recognized as an individual, but not possessed and catalogued by a reading public.

## VI. Conclusion

The critique of conventional discourse that is implicit in the works of both novelists cannot be said to be "rationally grounded". It is, however, linked to a criterion which may be tentatively identified with a spiritual and aesthetic awareness in *The Devils*, and with a more nebulous sense of incompleteness in *Notes*; with the need to play in *Projet*, and with the more consciously articulated sense of the place of creativity and the workings of the unconscious in our lives, in *Le miroir*.

The two novelists' evident reluctance to name their criterion definitively, however, a reluctance which shows in the circuitous and sometimes self-contradictory way in which they present it, demonstrates their affinity with a more contemporary form of scepticism than that expressed by the original Greek Pyrrhonists, who showed no such hesitation in their use of "le langage articulé". In this sense the "metanarratives" of the two novelists could be said to challenge the impulse for a rational criterion as proposed by the traditional philosopher, whether in his implicit acceptance of such a criterion, or in his assumption that, without it, critical debate and the possibility of renewing habitual terms of reference founder. However, depending on individual assessments of the different roles played by the language of the reason and the language of fantasy, this makes Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet neither more nor less sceptical than the ancient sceptic philosophers. Since rational analysis and that which is beyond reason both arguably have the power to challenge the narratives of a society and its members, our assessment of the question is likely to depend, in part, on our perception of which of these two discourses is accepted most uncritically in the "common life" of our own era.

In the final analysis, however, the "unnameable" criterion as manifested in works like *Notes* and *Projet* is shown to have a limited role in reorienting the direction of the narrative. More decisive, in this regard, is the interpersonal other who could be said to play the kind of subversive role *within* the text which the text theoretically plays in relation to the "paratext" of conventional discourse.

### 3 Other minds, scepticism and the solipsistic hero

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Only the objective word — the word of other equal consciousnesses — can be counterposed by the author to the all-engulfing consciousness of the hero.  
(M.M. Bakhtin)

#### I. i. The 'identity' question: *ce terme d'humain [...] quel sens possède-t-il au juste?*

As a means of throwing his own writing style into relief Robbe-Grillet represents the nineteenth-century novel as one in which character and novelist are sure of themselves: the first because he triumphs over the world, the second because he triumphs over the characters, accurately discerning their doubts and passions. Such a novel, Robbe-Grillet argues, belongs to an age which marked the apogée of the individual,<sup>1</sup> and in which man was confident of his place in a world that was only waiting, like Rastignac's Paris, to be conquered and understood. Our own twentieth-century world, Robbe-Grillet suggests, is "moins sûr de lui-même" and the novelist is consequently less certain of his powers of representation while his characters are made to reflect his anxieties and apprehensions. Underwriting these apprehensions with particular insistence is the uncertainty that attaches to the identity question: who am I? What does it mean to be human? For, discovering he is no longer at home in the world, the twentieth-century character, it seems, finds he is no longer at home for himself or the other. Doubts about individual and social identities, which the retreat from humanism has entailed, are demonstrated by other writers besides Robbe-Grillet — Sarraute (*Portrait d'un inconnu*); Simon (*La route des Flandres*); Beckett (*L'innommable*) — as well as being designated by contemporary philosophers like Derrida who writes: "personne n'est là pour personne, pas même pour soi [...]"<sup>2</sup> What is at issue here, I would suggest, is a contemporary rephrasing of Sextus Empiricus's view that "man is incapable of forming a ready conception of himself",<sup>3</sup> that doubt about our ability to know objects of sense-perception extends to doubts about our ability to know ourselves and other minds.

In this chapter I propose to examine some of the implications of this aspect of scepticism focussing in particular on the self/other relation in Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet's style of characterization. I hope to show that the interpersonal dramas in their novels demonstrate not only a shift away from essentialist humanism but also the important

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<sup>1</sup> *Pour un nouveau roman*, p28.

<sup>2</sup> *De la grammatologie*, p332.

<sup>3</sup> *Sextus Empiricus. The Major Writings*, p134.

role that may be played by the other in constituting and subverting identity, in defining the human and in ensuring such definitions are never completed. The term 'identity' is thus an inappropriate one to apply to the novelists' characters because of its connotations of wholeness, perfection, and consistency. The one point at which it may be used with some justice is when the characters are conditioned by solipsism, according to which their perceptions are the only reality in a world that is entrapped by the "pathetic fallacy". In this case thought-processes tend to become static and obsessive as the characters assume the identity of monomaniacs. Otherwise, 'self', 'individual', 'person' are preferred terms in the chapter, partly because they are used by the novelists themselves,<sup>4</sup> and partly because they reflect the attachment to personhood that is reflected in Dostoyevsky's unruly humanity, for example, and in Robbe-Grillet's manic inventors.<sup>5</sup>

Dostoyevsky's place in this discussion is assured by Robbe-Grillet's pointed interest in one of his more perplexing characters — Stavrogin of *The Devils* — and by Dostoyevsky's own preoccupation with the vulnerability of his character's humanity. Despite his frequent reference of this vulnerability to a form of transcendence Robbe-Grillet denies Dostoyevsky's "living life", or, the "man in man", has, by virtue of its very fragility, something in common with Robbe-Grillet's "homme nouveau". The questioning of Derrida and Robbe-Grillet, therefore, who ask — "Que veut dire 'conscience'?",<sup>6</sup> and, "Si ce n'est pas un mot vide de sens, quel sens possède-t-il au juste [ce terme d'humain]?"—<sup>7</sup> is foreshadowed in the underground narrator's cry: "how am I [...] to be sure of myself? Where are the primary causes on which I can take my stand, where are my foundations?"<sup>8</sup> and in Peter Verkhovensky's realization in *The Devils* that the characters he has been manipulating are, in the end, beyond his comprehension and power to control. Before examining the novels, however — Dostoyevsky's *The Devils* and *Notes from Underground*, Robbe-Grillet's *Le voyeur* and *Djinn* — I wish to clarify the frames of reference in which Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet seem to operate with

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<sup>4</sup> Dostoyevsky, for example, uses terms translated as 'person', 'self', 'individuality' in his notebooks. See *The Unpublished Dostoyevsky I*, p39. Robbe-Grillet uses 'consciousness' when discussing the phenomenological aspects of his characterization, but also 'self', 'other' 'individual', in *Three Decades*, pp191-192.

<sup>5</sup> This sense of the personal is not reflected in the linguistic term 'subject', for instance, according to which the 'I' is first and foremost the subject pronoun of the verb. Dostoyevsky implicitly disputes this view while Robbe-Grillet rejects it outright. See *Le miroir qui revient*, pp10-12. The terminology of psychoanalysis — the 'ego', Lacan and Kristeva's 'other/Other' — introduces another possible set of references which I have not explored in the chapter. Note that David Patterson offers a Lacanian reading of Dostoyevsky's *The Double* in *The Affirming Flame*.

<sup>6</sup> *Marges de la philosophie*, p17.

<sup>7</sup> *Pour un nouveau roman*, p47.

<sup>8</sup> *Notes from Underground*, p27.

principle reference to Bakhtin (in Dostoyevsky's case) and Husserl (in Robbe-Grillet's case), either because of their own or others' association of these thinkers with their style of characterization.

#### I. ii. Dostoyevsky: an incalculable yet present 'I'?

One of the defining features of Dostoyevsky's characters is their unaccountability, and hence their tendency to exceed and contradict definitions of them by the narrator, other characters, or even, as Bakhtin would also add, by the author.<sup>9</sup> Some aspects of their nature are left indeterminate which suggests a certain freedom of definition and capacity for change in Dostoyevsky's conception of the personal: a freedom clamorously defended by the underground man and demonstrated by minor as well as major characters in *The Devils*. The conception of the personal as something that cannot be systematized or explained is apparent throughout Dostoyevsky's œuvre, Dmitri Karamazov from the last novel echoing something of Peter Verkhovensky's frustrations in *The Devils* when he declares: "Yes, man is wide, too wide, indeed. I would narrow him. I'm hanged if I know what he really is!"<sup>10</sup>

This element of incalculability would appear to be associated with a deliberate attempt on Dostoyevsky's part to drive a wedge between his characters wayward humanity and the structures of ideology and language which represent it. The use of eye-contact in *Notes*, for example, and Shatov's insistence in *The Devils* that a "man and his convictions are two different things",<sup>11</sup> seem to designate a humanity prior to systems of signification. The "man in man" is thereby endowed with an innateness that is anathema to Robbe-Grillet, and incongruous with contemporary thinking on the inescapability of (linguistic) mediation in human experience.<sup>12</sup> It is Bakhtin who, despite his own

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<sup>9</sup> See Chapter 2 of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.

<sup>10</sup> *The Brothers Karamazov*, p124.

<sup>11</sup> *The Devils*, p580. See my Chapter 2, p74, however, for some ethical implications of this attitude.

<sup>12</sup> Derrida's scepticism about identity, which I referred to in the opening paragraph to this chapter, could be cited a little more fully as an example of this awareness of the role of textuality in subverting an intrinsic, "present" humanity: "à travers la circulation et les renvois infinis, de signe en signe et de représentant en représentant, le propre de la présence n'a plus lieu: personne n'est là pour personne, pas même pour soi; on ne peut plus disposer du sens, on ne peut plus l'arrêter, il est emporté dans un mouvement sans fin de signification." In other words, the meaning of personality, like the meaning of the text, always escapes us. It is 'deferred' by the duplicities of the sign-system on which it depends.

For Dostoyevsky, however, the interpersonal encounter introduces certain limits into this play of signification. To use Clark and Holquist's formulation of this difference in approach, from the interpersonal perspective, "We own meaning", whereas for the personalist, "I own meaning", while for the deconstructionist, "no



prioritizing of the socio-linguistic sphere, offers an appropriate theoretical description for this "innerly unfinalizable" aspect of Dostoyevsky's characters:

one dare not turn a living person into the voiceless object of a secondhand (zaochnoe) finalizing perception. In every person there is something which only he himself can reveal in a voluntary act of self-consciousness and expression, something which is not amenable to an externalizing secondhand definition.<sup>13</sup>

Bakhtin's reference to "self-consciousness" and "revelation" in his analysis of Dostoyevsky might seem to lead in the direction of a metaphysics of presence, and so to some essential self which "'existe', soit présent, soit 'lui-même' quelque part",<sup>14</sup> as Derrida phrases it, in spite of its evasiveness. Yet if, as Dostoyevsky once wrote to a correspondent, "you can't get rid of your 'I'", the "I" in Dostoyevsky is not only indeterminate, it is also incomplete through its relation with the other. So although selfhood has a clearer definition in Dostoyevsky than it does in Robbe-Grillet the self's orientation towards the other keeps that definition open.

### I. iii. The other who is my neighbour versus "universal man"

Judging by his correspondence as well as by his novels otherness for Dostoyevsky is linked to a quest for transcendence both in the sense of other-worldliness, and so to that which is beyond human experience and comprehension (the 'other' of metaphysics), and in the sense of other minds, and so to an experience of difference associated with interpersonal relations. Although the two impulses are sometimes dissociated in his characters, Dostoyevsky links them deliberately and persistently in his account of the personal.<sup>15</sup> The otherworldly orientation he believes is endemic to humanity and a sign of immortality ("So you can't get rid of your 'I', you see; your 'I' will not subject itself to earthly conditions, but seeks for something which transcends earth"),<sup>16</sup> is therefore to be realized in concrete social terms lest it become abstract and idealized; a solely private vision that is an escape from the difference of other people. In a letter to a group of students, for example, responding to their complaints of public intolerance, Dostoyevsky voices the concern that they themselves have turned away from society, avoiding

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one owns meaning". See Mikhail Bakhtin, pp11-12.

<sup>13</sup> *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p47. Contrast this, however, with a remark in *The Dialogic Imagination*, where Bakhtin stresses that the important struggle in the novel is "among socio-linguistic points of view, not an intra-language struggle between individual wills or logical contradictions". (p273)

<sup>14</sup> *Marges de la philosophie*, p21.

<sup>15</sup> See my Chapters 2 and 5 for fuller reference to the metaphysical orientation of Dostoyevsky's writing, both in the context of a discussion of his criterion (Chapter 2), and his sceptical quest (Chapter 5).

<sup>16</sup> *Letters*, pp234-235.

involvement with their own people and folk heritage in pursuit of "the abstract realm of fantastic 'Universal Man'" attempting to sever "all the bonds which still connect him [i.e. the ideal man] with the people".<sup>17</sup> The authentic man, on the other hand, Dostoyevsky implies, does not exist in isolation where his personality has no chance to develop and ultimately no meaning. The "I" can only fulfil its potential in community. It is, therefore, a nexus of relationships.

Bakhtin makes the same point in his analysis of the characters in Dostoyevsky's novels, creating a distinction between the potentially unruly individualism of the "innerly unfinalizable" 'I' and the interpersonal difficulties arising from social contact. The "man in man" in Dostoyevsky, says Bakhtin, can only be worked out in a context of human relationships:

Only in communion [...] in the interaction of one person with another can the 'man in man' be revealed, for others as well as myself.<sup>18</sup>

Bakhtin thus repeats the view Dostoyevsky expounds in his correspondence, which is that personality is a collective rather than an individual affair, a process that evolves in the course of social interaction rather than a concept existing in the abstract.

#### I. iv. The other as disruption of identity

Despite, then, the desire to retain the indeterminate freedom of the "I" by evading the "finalizing perceptions" of others, interpersonal relations are the key to the "man in man" in Dostoyevsky. For this reason Dostoyevsky's notion of selfhood, for all its intrinsicality, is not equatable with essentialist humanism since in every encounter with the other the self can be remade. This principle of interdependence has psychological implications: to refuse the other means to negate the self also. Hence the appearance of arrested movement that, on one level, is associated both with Stavrogin (*The Devils*) and with the underground man (*Notes from Underground*), their mutual loss of a sense of reality and purpose being related to a withdrawal from personal engagement. If, then, as Bakhtin suggests, the "affirmation of another man's I — 'Thou art'" is:

the task which Dostoevsky's heroes must fulfil in order to overcome their solipsism, their reclusive "idealistic" consciousness, and to transform the other person from a shadow into a true reality"<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> p241.

<sup>18</sup> *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p213.

<sup>19</sup> p7.

it is a task they must perform to retrieve *themselves* from the realm of shadows also. The fact that characters in Dostoyevsky frequently refuse to perform this task, however, betrays the extent to which Dostoyevsky makes the self/other relation an ethical problem and not just a philosophical or perceptual one. The other that can be ignored introduces a different set of problems from the unknowable other who is closed to inquiry and questioning. As Michael Fischer suggests, following the lead of Stanley Cavell, such radical other-minds scepticism can even be an evasion of some of the practical difficulties of personal interaction:

Failure to acknowledge others — to read them as human — may indicate not the absence of something in them but the presence of something in us: confusion, indifference, callousness, exhaustion, coldness, spiritual emptiness, among many other possibilities.<sup>20</sup>

Dostoyevsky is evidently aware of these practical and ethical difficulties. A degree of responsibility is involved in the process of authoring selves in his novels, the readiness to acknowledge mutual vulnerability and reciprocal freedoms being understood as an affair, in part, of choice. The ethical dimension Dostoyevsky gives this question establishes his affinity not only with Bakhtin, but also with thinkers like Martin Buber and, more recently, Emmanuel Lévinas who writes of the self/other relation:

I am defined as a subjectivity, as a singular person, as an 'I', precisely because I am exposed to the other. It is my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other that makes me an individual 'I'. So that I become a responsible or ethical 'I' to the extent that I agree to depose or dethrone myself [...] in favour of the vulnerable other.<sup>21</sup>

Lévinas, with Dostoyevsky, stresses the extent to which engagement with the other involves a disruption of one's being in the world, and, ultimately, sacrifice, as the other's demands for acceptance and recognition require a suspension of the individual's claim to preference. The self's need for recognition must therefore be temporarily set aside, and lost, or "deposed" as Lévinas phrases it, in the movement towards the other.

In Dostoyevsky's novels, as I hope to demonstrate, the movement of generosity towards the other is rarely carried out and, when it is (by Liza in *Notes* for instance) it is not always accepted and reciprocated. The balanced, polyphonic exchange as expounded by

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<sup>20</sup> Stanley Cavell *and Literary Skepticism*, p68.

<sup>21</sup> *Dialogues*, p62. Clark and Holquist note Bakhtin's introduction to the thought of Martin Buber in the first chapter of their work on Bakhtin (see *Mikhail Bakhtin*, p27). Bakhtin's discussion of interpersonal relations has something in common with Buber's thinking on the relationship of interdependence between self and other as explored in his work, *Ich und Du*, or, *I and Thou*.

Bakhtin and Lévinas must first be understood as a theoretical and ethical ideal rather than as a fully realized given in Dostoyevsky's world. As Dostoyevsky phrases it, it is the "law of our ideal" rather than "the ideal law".<sup>22</sup> For, as Dostoyevsky observes in his notebooks, the desire to preserve one's individuality intact, one's "identity", in fact, constantly interferes with the movement towards the other so that, ironically, the individual is unable to realize its full potential:

To love a person *as one's own self* according to the commandment of Christ is impossible. [...] The law of individuality on earth is the constraint, "I" is the stumbling block. [...] Christ alone was able to do this, but Christ was eternal, an eternal ideal toward which man strives and should by the laws of nature strive. Meanwhile, after the appearance of Christ as the *idea of man incarnate*, it became as clear as day that [...] the highest, final development of the individual should attain precisely the point [...] where man might find, recognize [...] that the highest use which he can make of his individuality, of the full development of his *I*, is to seemingly annihilate that *I* [...] In this way the law of the *I* merges with the law of humanism [...]<sup>23</sup>

Dostoyevsky's novels are to some extent a record of the failure to achieve the "highest final development of the individual". The relationship between characters in both *Notes from Underground* and *The Devils* are unbalanced and fraught with the silence of miscomprehension and rejection. Solipsism is thus maintained through ethical as much as ontological barriers. But the problem of relationships is not thereby relinquished and the implied author repeatedly forces his characters into situations where their ethical complacency is under threat. He does not, in other words, leave them in peace with their individualism, but allows them, on occasions, to "glimpse the ideal through all [their] falls,"<sup>24</sup> and thus experience a momentary disruption of their isolated being in the world as well as relief from the stagnation that goes with it.

#### I. v. Robbe-Grillet, Husserl and the void of self

Robbe-Grillet's conception of character is based on premisses that are totally different to Dostoyevsky's: a difference that is all the more apparent because of the black and white metaphors Robbe-Grillet sometimes uses in his theoretical statements. Lacking the sceptical caution of a Derrida, for example, who presents consciousness as a structure of differences which exceeds "l'alternative de la présence et de l'absence",<sup>25</sup> Robbe-Grillet presents his readers/auditors in a 1982 colloquium with a choice between two extremes — presence or absence, or, a full humanist consciousness and the empty Husserlian

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<sup>22</sup> *The Unpublished Dostoevsky*, p41.

<sup>23</sup> p39.

<sup>24</sup> p39.

<sup>25</sup> *Marges de la philosophie*, p21.

consciousness he identifies with New Novel characters:

What is strange is that readers remain completely conditioned by a transcendental philosophy which maintains that consciousness is full and that it diffuses fullness and meaning around itself, while what we call a modern consciousness, or a Husserlian consciousness, is an empty consciousness. There is nothing within consciousness, Husserl claims. Consciousness is simply a movement of outward projection, what he calls phenomenology. [...] This consciousness never has anything inside itself, but is unceasingly projecting itself out of itself, away from this self in which there is nothing, toward the world where there is nothing either.<sup>26</sup>

A preoccupation with absence is also evident in the 1986 lecture, 'Le vide comme générateur du texte', where the image of a gold ring became an analogy for consciousness as a "phénomène de vide et de contradiction". What is important in the constitution of the ring, Robbe-Grillet suggested (following Sartre), is not the band of gold but the empty space it designates so that one might conclude, "ce n'est pas l'or qui constitue l'anneau, c'est le vide". Likewise, with the consciousness, what is important are the lacunae, the lack of identity and defining limitations, not the individual manner of receiving and responding to things. Hence Robbe-Grillet's fascination with Dostoyevsky's Stavrogin for his role in Dostoyevsky's novel as "le démon absent" who creates what Robbe-Grillet calls elsewhere "le 'centre vide' bougeant sans cesse à l'intérieur des *Possédés*".<sup>27</sup>

A degree of simplification is often consequent on making a point and making it clearly, and part of Robbe-Grillet's notoriety as a critic, of his own and others' novels, derives from his readiness to make statements in provocatively bold type. In fact, however, the tabula rasa theory of consciousness and world as devoid of attributes misrepresents Husserl as well as giving a false impression of Robbe-Grillet's overall views of the mind/world relation, particularly as this concerns the role of the other (the material world, other minds), in stimulating creative thinking.

Husserl's phenomenological epoché, for example, which has some affinity with the Pyrrhonist epoché, or, suspension of judgement,<sup>28</sup> does indeed eliminate the thing-in-itself, and with it, the reality of the objective world and the concept of the self as an "individual man".<sup>29</sup> But Husserl does not equate this bracketting of external and

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<sup>26</sup> *Three Decades*, pp191-192.

<sup>27</sup> *Le miroir qui revient*, p215.

<sup>28</sup> The phenomenological epoché is concerned, as is the Pyrrhonian epoché, with a "ubiquitous detachment from any point of view regarding the objective world." *The Paris Lectures*, p8.

<sup>29</sup> See pp 10 and 8 of *The Paris Lectures*.

personal reality-concepts with an absence in either self or world. The life of consciousness, he proposes, is "in flux" and "devoid of fixed last elements", but this flux is governed by what he calls a "highly pronounced 'class structure'" in which he includes perception and recollection, for example. More emphatically Husserl concludes that:

the central ego is not an empty point or pole, but [...] it experiences, with each act that radiates from the ego, a lasting determination. For example should I have decided the nature of something through an act of judgment, then this fleeting act disappears, but I do remain the ego which has thus decided. I find myself continuous [*selbst*] and enduring, as the ego of my enduring consciousness.<sup>30</sup>

The consciousness, then, through the exercise of its capacities to perceive and respond to sense-objects, experiences a sense of 'personal' continuity and consistency, and thereby 'discovers' itself.

#### I. vi. A matter of relation

In fact, the phenomenological consciousness is presented by Husserl in terms neither of absence nor of presence but of relation; of the mind's continual response to things outside it, and the reflection of these things in the mind perceiving them. If, in this scheme of things, the mind is seen not to function independently of the objects of perception (see p18 of *The Paris Lectures*: "the stream of consciousness is permeated by the fact that consciousness relates itself to objects"), then nor can these objects be said to exist independently of the way in which they are perceived. Thinking and feeling are thus not internal, self-sufficient processes that occur without some kind of complement in the world of appearances. Wanting the best of several philosophical worlds, Robbe-Grillet himself claims to subscribe to the phenomenological ideal of interdependence, whereby all things function in relation to each other. He follows through Husserl's remark, for example, that "Consciousness is always consciousness of something",<sup>31</sup> by defining desire in relation to its object. Olga Bernal repeats a remark to this effect made by Robbe-Grillet in 1959:

Si tout état de conscience est conscience de quelque chose, l'homme est bien obligé de sortir de lui-même, de chercher le complément, l'objet de sa conscience dehors, dans le monde matériel auquel il est lié indissolublement. "le désir qu'un enfant a d'une bicyclette, c'est déjà l'image nickelée des roues et du guidon".<sup>32</sup>

If this frame of reference negates the idea of independent psychologies, Robbe-Grillet

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<sup>30</sup>    *The Paris Lectures*, p26.

<sup>31</sup>    p13.

<sup>32</sup>    *Le roman de l'absence*, p12.

sees that it also negates the thing-in-itself. For if it is impossible to perceive anything apart from acts of perception there is no evidence of a thing's having reality outside the mind. Robbe-Grillet indicates that some critics of his novels have overlooked this salient point:

Les critiques qui, à l'époque du *Voyeur* ou de *La Jalousie* utilisent ce mot semblent penser que le phénomène est une chose en soi. Or Husserl montre bien que le phénomène est au contraire une chose sur laquelle se projette une conscience.<sup>33</sup>

#### I.vii. The appearance of solipsism

Yet the principle of interrelationships in phenomenology is as fraught with ambivalence and contradiction as the ideal of interdependence proposed by Bakhtin in his reading of Dostoyevsky. The phenomenological equation, whereby consciousness functions in relation to objects, is, of Husserl's own admission, vulnerable to solipsism.<sup>34</sup> For although phenomenology allows for a certain experience of alterity this alterity always passes through the medium of the mind in which alone it has existence and validity. Hence, while Husserl insists that objects of appearance have certain "specific determinations" and "such-and-such factual content"; and although he allows that we do experience other minds ("It is a fact that I experience other minds as real [...] Not only do I experience them as spatial presentations psychologically interlaced with the realm of nature, but I also experience them as experiencing this selfsame world which I experience"),<sup>35</sup> he makes it clear that the consciousness, or, what he calls the "ego cogito", is the mediating centre in which everything finds meaning.<sup>36</sup> Hence he can say that:

Through this ego alone does *the being of the world*, and, for that matter, any being whatsoever, make sense *to me* and has possible validity.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> From an interview in *Qui suis-je?*, p149.

<sup>34</sup> "If I, the mediating 'I', reduce myself through an *epoché* to my absolute ego and to that which constitutes itself therein, then, do I not become the *solus ipse*? *The Paris Lectures*, p34. Note that solipsism was a spectre that haunted the Ancient sceptic also. See A.J. Cascardi's 'Skepticism and deconstruction', p6: "For the skeptic, the world is a dream, a vision, an hallucination [...] madness for him takes the form of solipsism, the spectre against which Wittgenstein guarded throughout both periods of his career. The skeptic's greatest worry is that what he thinks he sees as the external world may also be a product of his consciousness".

<sup>35</sup> *The Paris Lectures*, p34.

<sup>36</sup> Validity is not equated by Husserl with 'reality', however, for, as he observes in *The Paris Lectures*, there is no absolute guarantee of the "trustworthiness of my experience". (p15)

<sup>37</sup> cf p35 for Husserl's interpretation of intersubjectivity and his remark on p11 concerning the external world: "Once I have banished from my sphere of judgments the world, as one which receives its being from me and within me, then I, as the transcendental ego which is prior to the world, am the sole source and object

If, then, other minds may be experienced by the 'ego' they are experienced through an act of empathy which reaffirms the primacy of the 'ego' in relation to which everything else is understood — not vice versa. In other words there is a structuring of the other in relation to the self and not a structuring of the self in relation to the other.

This understanding of other minds always and of necessity in terms of the paradigm of the self is closely mirrored in a remark by Robbe-Grillet when speaking of his perception of his father, namely, through discontinuous memories and images, "une constellation d'étoiles mobiles, qui serait constamment en train de chercher sa forme, comme si mon père était en train lui-même, dans ma tête, de rechercher sa propre figure". To which the interviewer responds, "Dans ta tête?", and Robbe-Grillet reiterates: "Oui. Et par conséquent, dans le monde, puisqu'en fin de compte, il n'y a d'autre chose au monde que ma tête, que ce qu'il y a dans ma tête".<sup>38</sup> This is a continuation of a much earlier remark concerning Robbe-Grillet's conception of "l'homme nouveau", namely, the passionate voyeur for whom the objects of the material world are the vocabulary of his desire. Things are seen to be meaningful for the "new man" only when they are translated into his own highly subjective discourse, since the "objets de nos romans n'ont jamais de présence en dehors des perceptions humaines, réelles ou imaginaires" so that the novel, in effect, "ne vise qu'à une subjectivité totale".<sup>39</sup> The phenomenological equation is thus unbalanced as the *solus ipse* in Robbe-Grillet deprives objects, and other minds it would seem, of their "specific determinations".

There is thus already a tendency in phenomenology to solipsism of which Robbe-Grillet appears to take full advantage. As a result, there is a sense in which the hero-narrators in his novels are in undisputed control of the meaning of the world in which they find themselves, a state of affairs that is very little advance on the anthropomorphic humanism Robbe-Grillet disparages in *Pour un nouveau roman*, and according to which man looks on the world only to see in it his own reflection.<sup>40</sup> Yet Robbe-Grillet's novels reveal inconsistencies in his use of the phenomenological model of consciousness. They show tensions, for example, between the phenomenological principle of relation (and its vulnerability to solipsism), and a fascination with a concept of otherness that is quite contradictory to phenomenological principles.

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capable of judgment".

38 'Conversation avec Alain Robbe-Grillet', p91.

39 *Pour un nouveau roman*, pp116,117.

40 See the essay 'Nature, humanisme, tragédie' for Robbe-Grillet's assessment of humanism "Sous prétexte que l'homme ne peut prendre du monde qu'une connaissance subjective, l'humanisme décide de choisir l'homme comme justification de tout"; and, "L'univers et moi, nous n'avons plus qu'une seule âme, qu'un seul secret". (*Pour un nouveau roman*, pp48 and 51)



## I. viii. The other and the experience of strangeness

These tensions, I would suggest, already have a precedent in Robbe-Grillet's essays. In 1956, for example, Robbe-Grillet drew attention to the medium of film and its primarily visual rendition of objects that, in a novel, are more overtly subservient to interpretative commentary. The impact of their visual presence on the viewer, Robbe-Grillet reasoned in this early essay, acts as something of a revelation of the strangeness, the otherness, of the material world to the mind of man:

L'aspect un peu inhabituel de ce monde [du récit filmé] reproduit nous révèle, en même temps, le caractère *inhabituel* du monde qui nous entoure: inhabituel, lui aussi, dans la mesure où il refuse de se plier à nos habitudes d'appréhension et à notre ordre. [...] Que ce soit d'abord par leur *présence* que les objets et les gestes s'imposent, et que cette présence continue ensuite à dominer, par-dessus toute théorie explicative qui tenterait de les enfermer dans un quelconque système de référence [...].<sup>41</sup>

Thus in the process of distinguishing between perceiver and perceived, between things as they exist, or appear to exist in the world, and the commentaries imposed on them, Robbe-Grillet upholds the idea of physical presence at the same time as he posits a more radical separation between self and other, consciousness and world, than that envisaged by Husserl. Moreover, Robbe-Grillet declares his intention to restore this very unphenomenological otherness in his novels by showing the objects and gestures his narrator-heroes perceive asserting their difference, and indifference, to the latter's imaginative projections. A world in which "there is nothing", is incapable of such resistance.

Underlining the same point is a reference to a personal as well as a material other in Robbe-Grillet's description of 'strangeness':

What do I call strangeness? [...] *Unheimlichkeit*, the fact that the individual feels his nature to be different from that of the things and people which are before him. [...] It is precisely at that moment when a thing becomes incomprehensible that the liberating shock is born within the awareness and body of man. [...] there is the rest of the world, which is the familiar world, and then, suddenly, there is a strange being who is precisely the other.<sup>42</sup>

What are we to make of this contradiction in Robbe-Grillet's thinking between absence and interrelationships, the void of self and personal difference/otherness?

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<sup>41</sup> pp19-20.

<sup>42</sup> *Three Decades*, p29. Note that this comment comes from the same colloquium where Robbe-Grillet elaborated his fullness/emptiness duality.

## I. ix. A struggling consciousness

Robbe-Grillet suggested in *Three Decades* that Husserl's account of the consciousness remains an imperfectly realized ideal rather than established practice for the modern novelist. For the most part, the novelist continues to be influenced by beliefs in transcendence and humanism at the same time as he seeks to adapt to new ways of understanding himself and his characters. Hence Robbe-Grillet's description of the novelist as a "struggling consciousness" at the intersection of 'old' and 'new' texts. Robbe-Grillet's novels reflect something of this struggle. In my view, however, this is not a sign of any failure to conform to a philosophical ideal so much as evidence of the grace of inconsistency and the demonstration by Robbe-Grillet the *novelist* of the complexity of the mind's response to the world, and itself, and the inadequacy of any philosophical model to appropriately convey this complexity. In *Le voyeur* and *Djinn*, therefore, we see something of the phenomenological equation of mind and world interrelating. But we also see the extreme unbalancing of this equation, and the tilting of the scales towards solipsism and appropriation at one moment, and a registering of the power of the other to disturb this mental stronghold, the next.

This is where the most significant meeting point between the two novelists lies — not in their stated philosophical or ethical views of character, which are vastly different, nor in their technique of characterization generally. But in their demonstration of a complex humanity that is at odds with theories about it and always, and especially, at odds with itself. I will argue that the (interpersonal) other contributes significantly to this complexity, challenging the perceptions of the self while remaining, in itself, inapprehensible. My understanding of the other in this regard is more informed by Bakhtin, than by Husserl, and by Lévinas, than by Derrida. In my analysis of the two novelists style of characterization I am interested in testing the validity of Lévinas's hypothesis that perhaps the very "capacity for interrogation and unsaying" is "derived from the pre-ontological interhuman relationship with the other".<sup>43</sup>

### *Notes from Underground*

#### I. i. Identity in the abstract

In Part I of *Notes from Underground*, which I have discussed in the two previous chapters, mental uncertainty is put on stage for the benefit of an imaginary audience. Emotions and reasons are subject to the "damned laws of consciousness", and evaporate

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<sup>43</sup> *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, p58.

"into thin air", as the underground man loses himself in a kind of deconstructionist labyrinth:

But how am I [...] to be sure of myself? Where are the primary causes on which I can take my foundations? Where am I to take them from? I practise thinking, and consequently each of my primary causes pulls along another, even more primary, in its wake, and so on *ad infinitum*. (p27)

This experience of uncertainty is seen to be cultivated as well as spontaneous as it is consciously preferred to the restrictions imposed by rational categories. Part I reads as a manifesto for an unruly humanity that expresses itself in negatives so as to avoid the finality of definitions. But in Part II, which I wish to focus on in the present chapter, the narrator is exposed to what proves a far more disturbing uncertainty, and one over which he has much less control, namely, the uncertainty that is created by another character when she invades his mental seclusion. When the hero-narrator is confronted in this manner by another, he is forced to drop his twittering protestations of non-entity and confront himself also. And this sudden consciousness of self proves more discomforting than any of the abstract uncertainties with which he has tortured himself in his underground shelter.

The narrator's social underground has come about partly as a result of a double rejection: he both dislikes himself, and he attributes this feeling to others, convinced that he is "regarded with loathing". (p47) This feeling is confirmed when he meets up with a party of school fellows in Part II of the story. Instead of acknowledging him as an equal they respond to his vulnerability with distaste, excluding him from the society he needs for his personal survival. Bakhtin's judgement that the solipsistic hero must learn to affirm others must be qualified by such an episode. It shows the responsibility of affirmation to be a communal affair and the underground man's failure to be a corporate as well as a private problem. Not surprisingly the narrator's response to rejection is to withdraw and seek solace in a life of fantasy:

But I had one resource that reconciled all these contradictions — escaping into 'all that is best and highest', in my dreams, of course, I dreamed endlessly. (p58)

An underground dream-world is thus the narrator's defence against the hurtful difference of others. The attractions of underground fantasy are such that they come to replace, and not merely compensate for, the interpersonal other. In his mind's eye, the narrator performs heroic exploits without effort or competition, discourses on saintly and revolutionary ideas without having to put them into practice, and experiences a warm desire to "embrace all mankind", without being inconvenienced by real people. When he

needs stimulus he turns, not to the interpersonal other, but to books to furnish his mind with the "external impressions" he craves. For books can be assimilated and absorbed into the underground in a way that people can not. Dostoyevsky's narrator observes that "beautiful ready-made images of life" may be "forcibly wrenched from poets and novelists and adapted to every kind of service and requirement". (p60)

A deliberate distinction seems to be made in the narrative, therefore, between the 'intrapersonal' and the interpersonal, or, between the other of a discourse that may be internalized, and the other who is the narrator's equal and whose signification is less susceptible of manipulation. The contemporary textual sceptic may not agree with the validity of this distinction. One of Derrida's best-known arguments is that there is no 'différance' between speech and writing as our mode of receptivity is, in both cases, conditioned by language and hence subject to the same delays and deferrals of meaning. But Dostoyevsky's assumptions about meaning are quite different from Derrida's precisely because of his concern with the ethical problems that qualify the linguistic and ideological picture. In *Notes* Dostoyevsky seems to both maintain, and shift the boundaries of, Bakhtin's distinction between novelistic and scientific discourse. The latter, Bakhtin suggests, is "directed towards mastery over *mute objects*, [...] that do not reveal themselves in words, that do not *comment on themselves*",<sup>44</sup> while the former is enlivened by the interacting commentaries of a novel's characters. Dostoyevsky arguably confirms this view but in the context of his own novella, and as if to expose its limits, he indicates that such powers of disruption belong primarily to the sphere of interpersonal relations, and so, strictly speaking, neither to novelistic nor scientific discourse.

Certainly, without the personal other to introduce an element of incalculability and challenge, the thrill of the underground man's imaginary despotism soon palls and his dreams become bland, repetitive, and suffocating. Mental and emotional lethargy set in and he confesses to sometimes being "bored... to death". (p51) The private sanctuary has turned into a prison. He experiences an "hysterical thirst" for the "contradictions and contrasts" he has so carefully screened out, and longs for human society. His contacts with former school friends have proved a failure. He is unable to open the door from the inside. It is not until he meets Liza that a chink appears in the wall of the underground.

## II. ii. Self in the eyes of another

The narrator is first aware of Liza as a person through her eyes, which prove more important than spoken language in first establishing contact. Dostoyevsky's use of the

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<sup>44</sup> *Discourse in the Novel*, p351.

gaze suggests an almost mystical view of the eyes as “the lamp of the soul”, in other words, as something both expressive and communicative of the person. Hence Liza’s eyes are said to be “full of life and capable of reflecting both love and sullen hatred”, (p101) even though they do not fully reveal her to the narrator. Lévinas offers one possible reading of the phenomenon when he discusses the role of the human face in initiating a response and mode of interaction between people that is quite different from that permitted by spoken dialogue:

Rencontrer autrui, c’est d’abord accueillir un visage [...] Le visage n’est-il pas, avant tout, expression et appel, précédant le donné du connaître? [...] le visage d’autrui [...] signifie une demande. Le visage vous requiert, vous appelle au-dehors.<sup>45</sup>

One of the demands that Liza’s face signifies for the narrator is the demand for self-awareness. With Liza’s eyes on him, the narrator becomes aware of himself as a result of being looked at with unaccustomed curiosity and attention. Although Liza’s expression is at first sullen and indifferent it implies an acknowledgement of him as another, equal, human being which he has not had before:

Suddenly, beside me, I saw two eyes, open, regarding me with curiosity and fixed attention. Their look was coldly indifferent, sullen, like something utterly alien; it irked me. (p86)

Secondly, and as a corollary of this self-awareness, is the narrator’s awareness of Liza as another person who is different from himself to the point of strangeness, “something utterly alien”, as he puts it, evoking Robbe-Grillet’s description of the “strange being who is precisely the other”.<sup>46</sup>

This sense of strangeness seems vital to the whole experience of otherness in Dostoyevsky and its ability to stimulate a healthy scepticism about the self’s perceptions and judgements. For it is the strangeness of the other that is the most effective reminder of the limits of the self’s mastery over the world: that which is strange is that which is “not one’s own”. Hence the distinction between the use Dostoyevsky makes of the notion of personal presence and the reasoning Derrida maintains informs the “phonocentric necessity”, or, the privileging of the voice over writing. For this, Derrida argues, assumes the possibility of “perfect self-presence”, and of the “immediate possession of

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<sup>45</sup> ‘Lévinas au nom d’autrui’, p63. Victor Terras also notes the importance of the face as a revelation of the divine in iconography. The “Orthodox belief that ideally the human face has retained the divine features of God’s face” is “a belief on which the worship of icons is based [...]”. (*The Idiot’ An Interpretation*, p82)

<sup>46</sup> *Three Decades*, p29.

meaning".<sup>47</sup> One of the things to emerge from the narrator's confrontation with Liza, however, is that the interpersonal other cannot be reduced to one's own mental conceptions and expectations, cannot, in other words, be 'possessed.' Rather, the personal other keeps the mind awake to that which is irreducible to the paradigms of the self. On several occasions, Dostoyevsky uses terms that emphasize this notion of strangeness:

We lay there for a long time looking at one another, but she did not lower her eyes or change her expression, and at last I was filled with an eerie feeling. (p86)

And when he first sees her:

Mechanically I glanced at the girl who had come in: before me gleamed a fresh, young, rather pale face, with dark level eyebrows and a serious and, as it were, slightly wondering expression [...] There was something kind and simplehearted in that face, but also something so serious as to be strange. (pp84-85)

Furthermore, Dostoyevsky seems to imply that it is only in the context of such direct, personal interaction that language, too, is at its most provocative and disturbing. For in this story, at least, the hero is largely unchanged by the other of language until he is brought face to face with another speaking person. From the first, the narrator tries to manipulate Liza as he has manipulated the contents of books and adapted them to suit his purposes. But when he attempts to gain power over her by playing on her fears and taunting her with visions of domestic security, she responds unexpectedly. With some astuteness she remarks that his story "sounds just like a book". "The remark stung me painfully. That was not what I had expected", (p95) he comments, for of course, unlike the books he has been reading, Liza reserves the right to supply her own commentary. He does not immediately grasp that she herself is hiding behind a defensive mask to protect her vulnerability. When this vulnerability is revealed to him, it shocks and unnerves him even more than her mockery of his abstract ideas:

my nerve failed all at once. No, never, never had I witnessed such despair! She was lying face downwards, with her head buried in the pillow and her arms strained tightly round it. (p106)

Liza is thus momentarily acknowledged as a 'real' person, permanently and disturbingly other to the narrator in a way that books and ideas in the abstract can never be. As Bakhtin explains, she is a "living person", and as such, cannot be turned into "the voiceless object of a secondhand (*zaachnoe*) finalizing perception" with impunity.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> In *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, p115.

<sup>48</sup> *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p47.

The result of Liza's unexpectedly loving response is a momentary transformation in the narrator. His self-enclosed world is shattered by unfamiliar feelings of pity for someone besides himself, and her pity for him startles him into exposing himself and the wounded pride that has come to define him. The fact that she does not withdraw her acceptance after his confessions shocks him into a state of sincerity which enables him to experience 'real' emotion for the first time. (pp117-118) A special space has thus been created, in which a stripping away of masks and posturings culled from others is a prelude to a moment of sincerity, and even, of truth.

For because of Liza, the narrator now has a face. A shadowy self-image has begun to take shape in a way not possible when he was confined to his own reflections and fantasies. *Notes from Underground* confirms the view that personality is not complete and self-sufficient but is constantly worked out in relation to other personalities. Yet this is not a comfortable process. In the course of his interaction with Liza, the narrator is conscious of tendencies in his "character" that threaten to define him with distasteful clarity. These are nothing like the grand brushstrokes in a nineteenth-century portrait, having more to do with a shabby meanness and smallness of spirit. Not surprisingly, he is as anxious to be rid of this "self" as he was earlier to deny its existence. Having insisted in the first part of the novella that he has no identifiable attributes, he is brought to admit in the second part: "Well, I know this; I'm a blackguard, a scoundrel, an egotist". (p116) In addition, he intimates that Liza's exposure of him constitutes the grounds for resentment which he claims to have lacked in the underground rhetoric of the first part of the novella ("Resentment, of course, might [...] serve quite successfully instead of a primary cause [...] But what can I do if I don't even feel resentment?"). (p27) In Liza's presence, the narrator becomes a 'real' person in the grip of bewilderingly real emotions that threaten to overthrow him, so he is "half dead with mental pain — I have never experienced such pain and penitence." (p122)

This painful self-awareness could be the beginnings of the narrator's healing and restoration to society. For the other has the power to heal as well as hurt in its interaction with, and development of, the self. But the narrator in *Notes* decides the price is too high and, in the final pages, the narrative comes full circle and he is once more heard sounding forth from the underground. He conceives a loathing for the shocks and contingencies of what he calls "real" life:

It simply was intolerably burdensome to me that she was there. I wanted her to disappear. I wanted 'to be left in peace', alone in my underground. I had grown so unused to 'real life' that I could hardly breathe for the oppressiveness of it. (p119)

"Real life", the "living life", or, "ce terme d'humain": *Notes from Underground* shows the crucible of humanity to be interpersonal relations. These, at least, are what arguably feed the most significant "furnace of doubt" for Dostoyevsky's underground man. To refuse responsible relations with other people is an option he takes in the narrative, but it is judged as a retreat from "reality", and a failure to wrestle with experiences outside his immediate mental and emotional capacities. In Part I, the narrator would have us believe that the imagination, "inflamed to the point of madness", is the most fundamental "truth" about human nature. Part II demonstrates that the imagination can represent an escape from the even more fundamental "truth" of interpersonal relations, according to which the personality that is left to its own devices atrophies and becomes a static identity. By finally choosing to shut Liza out of his world, the narrator cannot develop but only repeat himself.

### *The Devils*

#### III. i. The other as object of "secondhand definitions"

The power of invention is a significant generating force in the narrative of *The Devils*. Although the story itself is presented by a single narrator, who also participates in events, the story-telling instinct is by no means restricted to him alone. The small town of which he writes seems buoyed up by a barely suppressed imaginative excitement which finds a surprising number of outlets: speculation and gossip are compulsive activities and these are complemented by melodramatic correspondence and novel-writing, theatrical posturings and buffoonery, even model-making, which, in its own way, enables a character to tell a story and define an alternative world. The narrative begins, for example, with rumours and hearsay about Mr Verkhovensky; the novel's ambivalent hero, Stavrogin, is made the subject of numerous rewritings by society throughout; Mrs Tarapygina, associated with the climactic events of the fête, is found to be a product of the crowd's overexcited imagination; Lembke, governor of the province, compensates for a lack of social achievement by making things — a cardboard theatre and model railway in his youth, later, a Lutheran church and a novel when the church, with its miniature people and organ, is confiscated by an apprehensive spouse who has more prosaic ambitions for her husband.

What is of particular interest in this world of burgeoning narratives, however, is the way in which the characters' obvious capacities for invention effect the nature of their relationships with others and their ability, therefore, to perceive and respond to personal difference. *The Devils* extends the theme from *Notes* where the gift of



creativity that gives the individual the freedom of self-definition is used to negate the freedom of others, the "law of personality" and attachment to one's own "fantastic daydreams" thus obstructing mutual comprehension and commitment to a shared vision.

A number of characters in the novel exercise their faculty for invention on other people, appropriating them to play certain prescribed roles in dramas of their own. Mrs Stavrogin does this most notably in her relationship with Stepan Verkhovensky, once engaged as tutor to her son, thereafter retained in a state of precarious and ambivalent friendship. Verkhovensky is forcefully guided by Mrs Stavrogin, who deals peremptorily with his eccentricities in the attempt to erase his irritating difference to her social ambitions. She dictates his style of dress, designing all the clothes he wears herself (in possible imitation of a dramatist whose portrait she fell in love with as a school girl), (pp33-34) and corrects his habits of speech, his vocabulary and choice of quotation. To the point where, as the narrator remarks, Stepan Verkhovensky almost becomes:

her creation, one might almost say her invention [...] She had invented him, and she had been the first to believe in her own invention. He was, in a way, a sort of dream of hers [...]. (pp29-30)

Unlike Mrs Stavrogin, Mr Verkhovensky's inventive ability is almost entirely centered on himself and his own persona. In this particular field, however, he excels, showing himself an irrepressible experimenter with poses and gestures. He enjoys his early role as a 'marked man', and manages to turn the loss of status after his expulsion from the university into a sign of distinction, a form of persecution that proves him to be a dangerous and important figure. He romanticizes his two former marriages (both wives having since deceased) and his attachment to his son whom he has hardly seen. Before going on stage the night of the fête to deliver his speech the narrator finds him excitedly pottering behind the scenes, oblivious to the real and destructive chaos about to erupt and taken up with "trying on different smiles and constantly consulting a piece of paper on which he had written down some notes". (p472)

But it is Stepan's son, Peter Verkhovensky, who is the main plotter and organizer in the novel. The chief difference between himself and other characters in this respect is that he does consciously and with malice aforethought what they seem to do blindly and sometimes to their own undoing. For Peter is aware of all the sub-plots with which the other characters are preoccupied: Mrs Stavrogin's exasperation at Stepan Verkhovensky and her fears about Stavrogin; Julia Lembke's thwarted ambitions. Peter makes use of

them all to achieve his own ends which concern creating anarchy in a small town prior to introducing (rather vaguely defined) socialist ideals. (Peter himself admits he is more of a “rogue” than a “socialist”). (p421)

In order to make best use of the available material Peter has to familiarize himself with the characters and their particular foibles. For this reason alone he is perhaps more intent on the different personalities than any other character in the novel as he subjects each of them in turn to scrutiny, looking for weak points and trying to predict their reactions in order to manipulate them more effectively. Difference is thus registered the better to be annihilated. Peter soon comes to feel he has got to the end of the characters’ meagre secrets and this assumed knowledge gives him a feeling of power. He delivers up the minor revolutionaries verbally in a few dismissive sentences to Stavrogin, prior to their both attending one of the meetings:

They’re waiting with gaping mouths, like young rooks in a nest, to see what present we shall bring them. A hot-headed lot. They’ve got their notebooks out [...] Virginsky — a cosmopolitan, Liputin a fourierist with a strong leaning towards police work; an indispensable man, let me tell you, in one respect, but demanding strict treatment in all others [...]. (p229)

Even the enigmatic Stavrogin finds his reactions closely analyzed as Peter attempts to forge a little intimacy between himself and the man who is most vital to his plans, the central motif in the whole design:

[...] I can’t give you up now. There’s no one like you in the whole world! I invented you abroad; I invented it all while looking at you. If I had not watched you from a corner, nothing of all this would have occurred to me! (p424)

Peter Verkhovensky’s persistent invention of the people he observes and his attempts to enmesh them in what turns out to be a mythical political organization would seem to make him more of a New Novel hero than Stavrogin. For Stavrogin is so aloof from others as to have lost interest, it seems, even in fantasizing about them.

But perhaps their responses have the same effect as Stavrogin’s aloofness. For, by a process of adaption to private dreams (Mrs Stavrogin), through the self-preoccupation that keeps a character in front of the mirror “trying on different smiles” (Mr Verkhovensky), or, because of a determination to manipulate in the pursuit of personal ends (Peter Verkhovensky), the other in *The Devils* becomes an increasingly imaginary composition subservient to the limited interpretation placed on it by the individual and his/her needs and wants. This seems to bear out Louis Allain’s criticism that the Bakhtinian thesis of polyphony “n’est qu’en leurre” whereas, in fact, the novels’

characters, for all their avowed openness to the challenge of the other, follow their author, who, Allain claims:

pratique une forme raffinée et pratiquement inédite de *solipsisme*: celle qui consiste non pas à nier l'existence d'autrui, mais au contraire à la reconnaître, à l'affirmer même, sous les espèces de sa propre monade.<sup>49</sup>

If this is the case, then each character in the novel must be seen to be closed to the other not because of the impenetrable barrier of difference but because of a fundamental indifference in the perceiver — an indifference that is responsible at the same time for turning all the characters' inventions into so many forms of self-projection.

### III. ii. Overturning the rules

Allain identifies a real problem in Dostoyevsky of which no-one was more aware than Dostoyevsky himself. Hence the despair expressed in the notebooks that human egoism will always be an obstacle to the full recognition of the other the law of Christ demands. But since Allain makes little attempt to modify his thesis that "Parler d'autrui" for Dostoyevsky is always equivalent to "parler de lui-même"<sup>50</sup> (and his characters likewise), and that the author's celebrated polyphony hides "l'homme-de-l'une-seule-pensée",<sup>51</sup> it seems to me that Allain himself could be accused of a simplifying reduction of Dostoyevsky's 'otherness' as a writer, his capacity for self-contradiction and, indeed, his insistence that this capacity is one of the most vital elements in the human picture. In *The Devils*, especially, the themes of manipulation and self-preoccupation are pointedly counterbalanced by some of the most effective demonstrations in Dostoyevsky's œuvre of the characters' resistance to being manipulated by others through their capacity to break through the circle of self-preoccupation. Allain's application of his theory to *The Devils* seems all the more inappropriate, therefore, given the fact that all of the characters in the novel are at some point shocked by someone who resists their solipsistic readings of them. Each of the characters previously mentioned for their readiness to manipulate others and surround themselves with creatures of their own invention may be re-examined in turn for the way in which their invented characters rebel against them, either in flat contradiction, or in a reminder of their 'creator's' vulnerability.

Mrs Stavrogin, for example, remains proprietorial to the last in her relations with Mr

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<sup>49</sup> Dostoeievski et l'autre, p149 and pp156. Note Allain's specific reference to *The Devils* in this regard on p154.

<sup>50</sup> p160.

<sup>51</sup> p21.

Verkhovensky. When he runs off to find Russia, as he puts it, hoping to step free of his past life and its problematic allegiances (not the least of which is his allegiance to his benefactress), Mrs Stavrogin tracks him down at the inn, breathing gargantuan vengeance and taking over space and people in her usual manner — “I’m Mrs Stravrogin, the widow of a general, and I’ll take the whole house”. (p649) He is terrified at the sight and sound of her. She is in predatory mode. But when she tries to evict the timid bible-seller, Mrs Ulitin, his collapse and obvious weakness shock her into something of a change of face. She nurses him, still bullying, and takes Mrs Ulitin under her protection (again, in character, “as a vulture seizes a chick”). What then emerges from the strange dialogue that follows is that each has tormented and disappointed the other because each has needed and wanted the other’s confession of love. Neither the ideal other of Mrs Stavrogin’s fantasies nor Mr Verkhovensky’s flattering self-reflections can satisfy this basic need. The need is, at last, acknowledged by them both, although perversely: he admits to having loved her for twenty years (an admission which is made insulting by his little story about the woman who was in love with him for twenty years but afraid to say so because she was too fat) while she admits, “I, too, was a fool”, (p651) after referring resentfully to the evening he proposed to her because he thought it was expected of him. It also seems clear from this exchange that Mrs Stavrogin is aware of Mr Verkhovensky’s ineradicable difference to herself, and so, of his irrepressible sentimentality (she guesses he will have made a declaration of love to Mrs Ulitin), and his manic changeability (“Father, [...] he’s such a man — such a man that in an hour you’d have to give him absolution again!”). (p655)

The relationship between the two could be compared with the relationship between old Salamano and his dog in Camus’s *L’Etranger*, in that it is strange, unbalanced, painful, yet necessary to both parties. Love in this case is not a matter of charity and sentiment but of the indispensable presence of another person who is not oneself. Salamano and his dog come to resemble one another. Mrs Stavrogin and Verkhovensky, however, remain emphatically different and both are aware of it. She is a bully who is usually in tight-lipped control of her spiteful aggressions. He is timid, hysterical and as vain as he is self-abasing. Neither “deposes” themselves in favour of the “vulnerable other” with the generosity of spirit Lévinas evokes. Mrs Stavrogin’s admission of need is forced out of her so she chokes on it while Mr Verkhovensky is all too ready to throw himself at people’s feet in an excess of melodramatic humility. Such a relationship lacks the balance of a truly polyphonic exchange as much as it lacks the transfigured charity of the Christian ideal. But there are two distinct voices involved in the relationship and each is sufficiently engaged to shatter the other’s self-possession, and to prevent the unqualified appropriation of personal difference Allain describes so blightingly.

Mr Verkhovensky's meeting with his son Peter is further evidence of the impossibility for Dostoyevsky's characters of emerging intact from their interpersonal encounters. Propelled forward, perhaps by imaginary sentiment fostered in absence, Stepan Verkhovensky rushes to embrace his son. Peter, however, pushes his father aside — "Now, now, don't be naughty, don't be naughty!" — and proceeds to expose him, thus dusting his hands of a distasteful intimacy while making flattering overtures to Mrs Stavrogin. (The exposure concerns absolving her son of some accusations Stepan has made about the former's philandering). The shock of being repulsed in this manner jolts Mr Verkhovensky into an uncharacteristically dignified silence, which surprises the narrator into observing:

Where did he get so much spirit from? [...] he was undoubtedly deeply grieved at his first meeting with his darling Peter [...] That was a deep and *real* grief to his heart and in his eyes at least [...] And surely a *real* genuine grief is sometimes capable of transforming even a phenomenally irresponsible person into a resolute and determined one for a short time, at all events [...]. (p209)

Like the underground man's momentary transformation by Liza's compassion, Mr Verkhovensky is suddenly changed into someone unlike himself who is nevertheless more authentic ("real", "genuine"), because of a newfound apprehension of the weaknesses in himself the other has exposed. The interpersonal other is, once again, shown to have a more radical impact on perception than the mirror of self-reflection before which it is all too easy to pose and play with "different smiles". And if Peter demonstrates his difference from the image his father has cherished of him as his "beloved son", so Mr Verkhovensky demonstrates in this incident his (temporary) difference from the image the narrator has of him as a self-dramatizing poseur with little self-awareness.

In the end, however, it is Peter who receives the most surprises from others because he is the one who reduces them most severely to "secondhand definitions". It is, in fact, the unruly otherness of the characters he has tried to organize that finally subverts his planned chaos so catastrophically, in a dramatic exposure of the folly of surrounding oneself with imaginary people. He is wrong about Lembke ("But he was wrong, his idea being merely based on the fact that from the very start he had invented for himself once and for all a Lembke who was a complete simpleton"); (p364) and his boastful statement about Lyamshin — "he is completely in my hands" — (p418) is ludicrously reversed when Lyamshin panics after Shatov's murder and starts screaming and stomping, attacking Peter bodily ("'It's very strange', observed Peter, looking at the madman with uneasy astonishment. He was obviously taken aback. 'I had quite a different idea of him' [...]").

(p600) Virginsky and Liputin similarly defy him in the end. When the latter refuses to take tea with him at Kirilov's for (to Peter's mind) obscurely superstitious reasons of his own, Peter bursts out in a moment of grudging illumination: "Smells of mysticism! I'm damned if I can make out what sort of people you all are!" (p553)

In the face of all this pointed textual evidence it would seem that Bakhtin is closer to the truth about Dostoyevsky's characters than Allain even though, as we have seen, Dostoyevsky vindicates and contradicts both critics, thus retaining his own "innerly unfinalized" characteristics as a writer. Peter's experience suggests, however, that the more concerted the appropriation of the other, the more dramatic is the eventual impact of personal difference when it occurs. This confirms the Bakhtinian view of Dostoyevsky's characters that "in every person there is something which only he himself can reveal in a voluntary act of self-consciousness and expression, something which is not amenable to an externalizing secondhand definition". Peter, the skilled plotter and analyst, is perhaps not the New Novel hero after all so much as the traditional novelist (as Robbe-Grillet represents this unimaginative animal) out of his element, who discovers that he has made insufficient allowances for the fact that "man is not a final and determinate quality upon which stable calculations can be made; man is free and therefore can overturn any rules which are forced upon him".<sup>52</sup>

### III. iii The elusive crown prince: demon of romance... ?

If, however, the majority of the characters in the novel affirm their otherness by revealing themselves to each other and the reader, there is one character who maintains his difference by seeming to reserve this right of expression. In other words, he remains other, in part, because he remains silent, because he finally refuses to show himself either to other characters or to the reader. This character is Nicolas Stavrogin whom Robbe-Grillet has appropriately called "le démon absent", or, "le démon qui manque", for his physical absence from many of the key scenes in the narrative and for the omissions and discrepancies which characterize his personal story:

Ainsi revient Nicolas Stavroguine, qui est le 'centre vide' bougeant sans cesse à l'intérieur des *Possédés*. Il n'est pas un démon parmi les autres démons, il est le démon des démons: le démon qui manque, celui qui *fait défaut*. Presque toujours absent de la scène actuelle du récit, on ne connaît ses agissements (hors champ, à l'étranger) que par d'étroits lambeaux rapportés de seconde ou de troisième main par des messagers douteux, qui n'en dévoilent ni n'en comprennent jamais le sens.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p48.

<sup>53</sup> *Le miroir qui revient*, p215.

Robbe-Grillet makes a direct correlation here between the phenomenon of absence and Stavrogin's importance as a character. His reasoning seems to be based on the assumption that the character who remains unknowable provokes greater interpretative effort than the character driven by the urge to self-expression to show himself, however obliquely, to other characters and to the reader. Where the latter demands recognition, the former calls for a degree of inventiveness. The gap between Stavrogin's aloof otherness and our understanding of him thus becomes the space in which we are free to invent and hypothesize, attempting numerous methods of approach to a problem whose secret eludes, and so continues to intrigue us. The equation of absence with creative freedom implicit in this reading of Stavrogin refers to something of importance in Robbe-Grillet's own novels, such as *Le voyeur* (which he mentions in connection with *The Devils*),<sup>54</sup> where a gap in the characters' timetable creates the speculative interest which, Robbe-Grillet suggests, drives the whole novel, the lacuna thus becoming the "générateur du texte entier". This, Robbe-Grillet adds, "n'est pas le cas chez Dostoïevsky".<sup>55</sup>

The responses of other characters in Dostoyevsky's novel nevertheless gives weight to the idea Robbe-Grillet expresses that Stavrogin's centrality to the narrative derives from his elusiveness. His indeterminacy could, in fact, be seen as the *raison d'être* for much of the inventive activity referred to earlier. When he arrives in the town with Peter Verkhovensky, for example, he is preceded by rumours about his debaucheries which are sufficiently recurrent to be convincing yet insufficiently authoritative to be established as facts. Kirilov is reputed to have noticed something strange about him but when questioned replies "I'd rather not talk about it", while Lebyatkin, who has been insulted by Stavrogin, is uneasy about something besides his own grievances and equally hesitant about offering an opinion on Stavrogin's character. (See pp112-113.) Such reservations have a piquancy about them conducive to gossip, and, since Stavrogin frequently declines to explain himself when he is physically present, the fabrication of stories about him goes unchecked. The ladies of the town respond with "raptures" to the opportunity of making Stavrogin a reflector of all their wildest fantasies, (p56) thrilled by the hint of power contained in reports of his excesses, and titillated by the possibility of some dark secret motivating them. Then, when Stavrogin inexplicably accepts a challenge to a duel from Gaganov while refusing to react at all to Shatov's blow in the face, the townsfolk cast him in a new role — again, in the absence of explanations from

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<sup>54</sup> Stavrogin's crime is made the subject of the "fragment de journal" mentioned in *Le voyeur*, as represented in *Le miroir*. Note that Stavrogin's confession is the portion singled out in the 1986 lecture as "une espèce de nouveau roman". The preoccupation Stavrogin has with temporal measurements and other minutia, as he waits, half consciously, for the little girl to commit suicide, could be compared to Mathias's preoccupation with similarly detailed observations in *Le voyeur*.

<sup>55</sup> p216.

Stavrogin himself — that of a man sensitive to the niceties of social etiquette and with a deep sense of responsibility:

‘Is there anything surprising in the fact that Stavrogin fought a duel with Gagonov but took no notice of the student? He couldn’t possibly challenge one of his former serfs to a duel could he?’ [...] Those words put an entirely new complexion on the affair. A new person appeared on the scene, a person everyone had misjudged, a person with an almost ideal severity of social standards. (pp301-302)

In such instances as these Stavrogin’s reserve makes others garrulous; his disinclination to comment on himself and his motives makes them analytical and inventive.

But it is Stavrogin’s confession which foregrounds the problem of absence, according to Robbe-Grillet, and ensures that readers also are drawn into the interpretative hyperactivity absence seems to encourage in the novel’s characters. Initially the chapter in question, ‘Stavrogin’s Confession’, or, ‘At Tikhon’s’, was excized from the original serialized version of the novel on grounds of impropriety, the problem of absence being thus dramatized by an editorial decision to withhold ‘evidence’.<sup>56</sup> This gap in the reader’s understanding of Stavrogin has since been closed with the inclusion of the chapter in most recent editions of the novel. The difficulty of interpreting Stavrogin remains, however, and this could be ascribed, in part, to the fissured quality of the Petersburg version of the chapter with which Robbe-Grillet seems to be familiar. For there are, in fact, several different versions of the missing chapter which are referred to as the Moscow and Petersburg versions.<sup>57</sup> In the Moscow version, (which seems to have been used by the translator for the Penguin edition for the crucial, second part of the chapter), the pages of Stavrogin’s confession (three) are handed in one piece and in their entirety to Bishop Tikhon. The nature of Stavrogin’s crime against a small girl, the main subject of the confession, is obvious without its having been directly described. In the Petersburg version, on the other hand, which is preferred by the translator of the French, Gallimard edition, there are five pages to the confession and these are given singly to Tikhon with the exception of the second page which is withheld by Stavrogin on the grounds that it is “censuré”.<sup>58</sup> While it is still evident from the French edition what

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<sup>56</sup> Katkov, the publisher of *The Russian Messenger* in which the novel was first serialized, refused to include the chapter for its reference to the abuse of a young girl, and possibly for political reasons also. See pp81-82 of Dolinin’s article, ‘Stavrogin’s Confession’.

<sup>57</sup> Just over forty years after Dostoyevsky’s death two versions of ‘Stavrogin’s Confession’ were made available to the public: the Moscow text, found in the galley proofs for the journal in which the novel was first published; and the Petersburg text, found amongst Dostoyevsky’s wife’s papers and copied out in her hand. See Dolinin, Mochulsky and Lord for details.

<sup>58</sup> Note that Robbe-Grillet highlights the act of censorship further by making



may have occurred in the missing interval the 'event' arguably assumes greater speculative and interpretative importance for its having been omitted. If it may be an exaggeration to see it as being of "exorbitante importance", as Robbe-Grillet phrases it,<sup>59</sup> the episode nonetheless may be said to acquire, through the tactics of restraint, an additional suggestion either of something too strange or terrible to be talked about or of some compulsion in the hero to deceive, and hence evade definition, for reasons of his own.

Robbe-Grillet is not the only reader to use the silence in Stavrogin's narrative as a means of embellishing this character with an additional mysterious allure. Jechova gives the missing piece in his confession a spiritual dimension of major importance ("Au niveau de la lecture, cet endroit vide provoque un inassouvissement, un sentiment de l'impossibilité de dire, et même de penser, d'imaginer tout. Au niveau spirituel plus large, il communique au lecteur une angoisse, la conscience d'une menace indéfinie, d'une incompréhension incurable");<sup>60</sup> while Marthe Robert, in her preface to the Gallimard edition of the novel, takes the tendency to romanticize Stavrogin to an extreme:

Chatov ne peut être le vrai héros du roman [...] Il doit céder le pas à Stavroguine, le séducteur irrésistible, le prince des ténèbres hissé par son orgueil au-delà du bien et du mal, le surhomme taré et noble malgré tout en qui Dostoïewski se donne la jouissance raffiné de commettre les crimes les plus vils. Image du grand pêcheur dont l'âme reflète à l'infini les jeux gratuits de la perversité, Stavroguine permet au romancier de s'abandonner aux sombres beautés de la transgression absolue, c'est-à-dire de séduire toutes les femmes sans en aimer aucune, d'être partout fauteur de scandales inouïs, à l'occasion violenteur de petites filles et même incendiaire par personne interposée — tout cela sans révolte, ni raison, ni passion, avec un désespoir glacé d'archange déchu qui l'accule finalement au suicide.<sup>61</sup>

Jechova and Robert give two convincing examples of Robbe-Grillet's maxim that absence provokes greater inventive effort than an overly delineated 'presence'. What happens as a result, is that Stavrogin's 'absence' is then appropriated in a particular way, so that, in the end, he is not absent at all. In Jechova and Robert's commentaries he is transformed into a very specific personality of tremendous romantic and spiritual stature.

### III. iv. ...or humbug?

The contrast between the Gallimard presentation of Stavrogin and the English Penguin

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59 Stavrogin, in a reworking of the episode in *Le miroir qui revient*, tear out two pages of the confessional document "sous les yeux étonnés de l'évêque". (p216)  
 60 Alain Robbe-Grillet describes it as such in *Le miroir qui revient*, p216.  
 61 'La Représentation par l'absence', p469.  
 61 From the introduction to *Les Possédés I*, p21.

reading of his character is so extreme as to be almost humorous. Instead of the “prince des ténèbres hissé par son orgueil au-delà du bien et du mal”, Magarshack, in his introduction to the English translation, describes Stavrogin, along with Peter Verkhovensky, as one of the “pegs on which Dostoyevsky hung his two most violent dislikes: his dislike of the Russian aristocracy and his dislike of the revolutionaries”.<sup>62</sup> After this unpromising encomium Magarshack concedes that Dostoyevsky’s ‘crown prince’ is an “obscure and enigmatic figure” but puts this down, firstly, to Dostoyevsky’s changing his mind about the role Stavrogin was to play in the novel (see *pxix* of Magarshack’s introduction), and, secondly, to the omission of the confessional chapter from the original ‘Russian Messenger’ edition. The inference seems to be that the inclusion of the said chapter in current editions has simultaneously removed much of the (falsely) mysterious dimensionality that adorned the original “peg”.

The problem of Stavrogin is explored from a similar angle only a lot more fully in an article by R.M. Davison who also considers in his presentation the related issues of absence and enigma intriguing to two of the aforementioned French readers. Like Robbe-Grillet and Jechova, Davison remarks on the way the “spirit of Stavrogin broods over everything” while he himself is “curiously absent”.<sup>63</sup> And, like them, Davison sees this absence as not merely a physical matter but also a psychological one, as a zone of indeterminacy resulting from a disinclination to explain on the part of the character and his implied author. (“Again there is an area of instability, of enigmatic half suggestion where any sort of definitive explanation is carefully kept hidden from the reader. [...] We must resign ourselves to being kept at a distance”).<sup>64</sup> But, like Magarshack, although for more specifically formulated reasons, Davison goes on to interpret this “absence” in a completely different way to the French readers I have referred to.

Basically, Davison approaches the problem from three points of view: the aesthetic, the self-perceptions of the character concerned, and, lastly, the perceptions of the other characters in the novel. In each case, Davison reads the indeterminacy of Stavrogin’s character in terms of non-entity rather than mysterious allure. From the point of view of aesthetic impact, he notes the delayed entrance of Stavrogin, both behind Peter Verkhovensky and, finally, unnoticed, as an example of the literary anticlimax which characterizes Stavrogin’s role throughout the novel, deflating even his suicide and suicide note at the end of the narrative. From the point of view of Stavrogin’s self-commentary Davison highlights, not the omissions, but the occasions when Stavrogin

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<sup>62</sup> *The Devils*, Penguin edition, *pxii*.

<sup>63</sup> ‘*The Devils: the role of Stavrogin*’, in *New Essays*, p95. Note, however, that Davison does not refer to the missing chapter at all in his article.

<sup>64</sup> p99.

clearly and explicitly declines to recognize himself as the important figure others make of him. ("What the hell do you want me for? Once for all, have a good look at me: am I your man? And leave me alone".) (p416) Lastly, Davison exposes the ambivalence in the response of the other characters to the man who is at once their demon and idol, and a rather ordinary mortal who has failed to come up to their expectations. Kirilov and Shatov, Davison points out, both use the past tense when speaking of how much Stavrogin has meant to them, while Peter, who has made Stavrogin into something of a personal divinity, is momentarily thrown into a rage by the realization that Stavrogin is unwilling and unable to fill the role specially cast for him.

Thus where Robbe-Grillet, for example, revels in the glorious "foisonnement" of illusions allowed by Stavrogin's indeterminacy, Davison points up the contrast between these illusions and the disappointing figure who is hidden behind them. He does not interpret this as an aesthetic oversight, however, seeing in it a fitting *mise en abyme* of the "gradual souring of hopes and loss of ideals" that is, in his view, the novels' prevalent theme.<sup>65</sup>

### III. v. Absence and ambivalence: some distinctions

This diversity of opinion amongst critics reflects, as Robbe-Grillet has already implied, some of the perceptual and interpretative problems with which the text engages on the level of its characters and their interrelationships. In other words, the inapprehensibility of Stavrogin, which gives other characters in the novel the incentive to invent, prompts critics to do likewise by exploring different avenues of interpretation. The potential variety of such avenues would seem to be further assured by the indecisive attitude apparently adopted by the author towards this particular character. In his introduction to the *Notebooks for 'The Possessed'* Wasiolek draws attention to the numerous sketches of Stavrogin in Dostoyevsky's notes for the novel. These Wasiolek describes as "a record of wrong Stavrogins, of trial upon trial of a different Prince (Stavrogin)", with the result that this became the longest of all Dostoyevsky's preparatory notebooks and yet the one furthest removed from the final version.<sup>66</sup> The groundwork is thus laid for the perfect 'writerly' text as even the authorial signature seems not to provide its usual theoretical limit on the play of meaning suggested by Stavrogin's 'text'.

Yet if the emphasis in the writerly text is on the multiplicity of perspectives then is not

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<sup>65</sup> 'The Devils: the role of Stavrogin', p113.

<sup>66</sup> See pp14 and 11 of *The Notebooks for 'The Possessed'*.

this interpretative feast reduced in a different way if the character's own perspective has been excluded? If it is impossible for one reading to embrace all a character's possibilities there is still room, in other words, for distortion when the reader-writer's text ceases to double back to the self-commentary of the character concerned, causing the latter to recede and be forgotten. In this case, inapprehensibility translates as absence, not ambivalence, and the critic's enrichment is seen to be achieved through a depletion of the character's 'otherness'.

For this reason I find Davison's reading of Stavrogin more convincing than Marthe Robert's. If Davison, for example, downplays Stavrogin's terrifying powers of self-control and the mesmerizing effect he has on others, Marthe Robert simply excludes all those moments in the text where Stavrogin threatens to become ridiculous, where her "prince des ténèbres", "surhomme taré et noble", "archange déchu", is revealed (in one of his roles), as a banal figure who is, moreover, wryly conscious of the fact. Tikhon's premonition, expressed in both Moscow and Petersburg versions, that the confession may be received by the public with derision rather than shock and horror exposes the limits of Stavrogin's superhuman mystique. For although his crime, real or invented, is represented on one level as the ultimate "proud challenge by an accused to a judge", (p699) on another level, it is represented as despicable and belittling, transforming its perpetrator into someone who is in need of a nurse. Stavrogin himself has already expressed a similar idea when, in a blackly humorous moment (Part II chapter 4), he wonders whether perhaps it is a nurse he really needs after all (see p299). Only a very tired devil will contemplate delivering himself into the mundanely practical hands of a "hospital nurse". More significantly still, in this respect, is Stavrogin's own description on this occasion of his personal devil not as an absent demon casting enigmatic shadows but as a "nasty, scrofulous little devil with a cold in his head, one of the failures". (p299)

Thus the "crownprince" lets fall, for a moment, the mask of the handsome sophisticate to reveal the alter ego of the underground man: an utterly incongruous metamorphosis. Admired and sought after, Stavrogin seems rather to embody the underground man's ideal than his sabre-rattling persona. But the text indicates the two share a common weakness. Bakhtin has already laid the groundwork for such a linkage when he draws attention to the two characters' ambivalent movement towards and away from the other in their respective 'confessions'. Hence:

Stavrogin's confession, like that of Ippolit and the "underground man", is a confession intensely oriented toward the other person, who is indispensable to the hero, but whom he at the same time despises and whose judgement he does not accept. [...] Without recognition and affirmation by the other person Stavrogin is incapable of accepting himself, but at the same time he does not want to accept the

other person's judgment of him.<sup>67</sup>

Bakhtin sees the confessional chapter, then, as an opportunity for dialogue that Stavrogin, after seeking out, finally turns down, despite the fact that Bishop Tikhon is represented as the ideal dialogic partner and a fitting confessor. For, like Stavrogin, Bishop Tikhon has unexplained omissions in his personal narrative which make his detractors scornful and his admirers protective "as though they were anxious to conceal something about him, some kind of weakness or even aberration". (p672) Stavrogin begins to respond to this unexpected mental alignment and is represented, at the beginning of the encounter, in that state of surprised bewilderment provoked by the sudden intrusion of the other into the solipsistic consciousness. At the same time he is surprised into exposing the other in himself when he temporarily relinquishes his tight self-control and talks, momentarily, with a "strange frankness" that is "out of character" with his former self. (p676) There is even a moment of psychological and emotional contact between the two ("I love you"). (p680) But, as with a similar moment in the underground narrative, the contact proves unbearable and Stavrogin pushes Bishop Tikhon away, closing the door again on his secrets and his poverty.

The encounter shows a Stavrogin who is unwilling, and perhaps unable, to sustain the gaze of the other, or the attention of another mind focussed so closely on his own. In this context, the failure of his love affair with Lisa appears to be just that: a drastic revelation of impoverishment rather than evidence of a masterful, if passionless, prowess. It is "in despair", the text tells us, that Stavrogin cries:

I had a hope — I've had it a long time — my last hope... I could not resist the bright light that flooded my heart when you came to me yesterday of your own accord, alone, first. I suddenly believed that I loved you. Perhaps I believe it even now. (p522)

As Lisa herself asks prior to this, "And is this the vampire Stavrogin?", (p521) to which we might add, is this the character in whom Robert sees the "Image du grand pêcheur" who, in his reflection of the "sombres beautés de la transgression absolue" is capable of seducing "toutes les femmes sans en aimer chacune [...]?"<sup>68</sup>

The uncertain space Stavrogin appears to occupy between the sublime and the ridiculous, the masterful and the vulnerable, prevents him, I believe, from fulfilling the role of a Mephistopholes out of a nineteenth-century melodrama. It makes him a more complex

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<sup>67</sup> *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p206.

<sup>68</sup> *Les Possédés I*, p21.

character and one, moreover, who experiences his own complexity as problematic.<sup>69</sup> Stavrogin, too, is sometimes frustrated by the insurmountable barriers of incomprehension and mistiming between self and other in Dostoyevsky. It is said of him that he is “looking for a burden”. It could also be surmized that he is looking for an addressee he does not find, partly because he cannot or will not recognize them (Tikhon), but partly also, because others cannot or will not recognize in him anyone but a stranger — a stranger they have tried to appropriate, ironically, by disallowing him to shed the strangeness that separates him from them and is an essential part of his mystique. As Peter says to Stavrogin after Lisa has left him: “I may be a clown; but I don’t want you, my better half, to be a clown! Do you understand me?” (p530) Stavrogin, it seems, is not to be allowed the ‘sin’ of ordinariness. In this way he exposes the poverty in others, besides himself, which motivates their eager transformation of him into the god that is to fill their small world and illuminate it. ‘Absence’ then, is not simply allied with invention or romantic mystery. It is also a sign of need, fear, inadequacy, and of the ongoing imbalance in the self/other relation which never finds its perfect equilibrium or yields the satisfaction which is the emotional and psychic equivalent of knowledge.

But one can err too far in this direction also. Something which is highlighted by a prioritizing of the theme of absence in the novel is the sense of uncertainty which close readings can write out of existence. This is one of the strengths of Robbe-Grillet and Jechova’s readings that both re-emphasize the silent spaces in the novel and so save Stavrogin’s incalculability from over-definition. And not only Stavrogin’s. For all the main characters struggle alternately with negation and signification as if suspended hazardingly over the emptiness that, on another level, is interpreted in narrow political terms. The work of devastation, therefore, that Peter allies with his own anarchic brand of ‘socialism’, which has “destroyed the old forces, but hasn’t put any new ones in their place”, (p423) is reflective of an apolitical experience of instability that helps define Kirilov and Shatov, Peter and Stepan Verkhovensky, as well as Stavrogin. If Stavrogin’s experiments of the will are threatened by futility — “But what to apply my strength to — that’s what I’ve never seen” — (p666) then Kirilov, too, with his suicide philosophy, embraces a void that he parries with a love of beauty and a fragile hope — “All my life I didn’t want it to be only words. [...] Now, too, I want it every day not to be words”. (p611) Shatov’s faith is paralyzed by unbelief and momentarily rekindled by

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<sup>69</sup> It also makes him a more “double” character than Davison represents him. Tikhon observes Stavrogin’s potential as well as his failure, while the juxtaposition of ridicule with romantic glorification in others’ perceptions of Stavrogin (Lisa’s for instance) makes him perhaps the ultimate illustration of the ironic shadows that accompany idealism in Dostoyevsky’s novels. If the fallen angel might turn out to be a shabby devil with a cold, heaven, as Svidrigaylov cruelly remarks in *Crime and Punishment*, might turn out to be a bathhouse with spiders in it.

the miracle of a child's birth; Peter Verkhovensky is cynically allied with a central committee he knows does not exist, yet asks Stavrogin to give meaning to his odd personal mythology. And Stepan Verkhovensky, whose erratic and excited discourse is sometimes as opaque as Stavrogin's silence, receives the last sacrament, expresses his eagerness to live his life over again, and admits:

My friend, all my life I've been lying. [...] Savez-vous perhaps I'm lying even now. The trouble is that I believe myself when I am lying. The hardest thing in life is to live and not to lie, and — and not believe your own lie. (p645)

Lacunae in the reader's understanding and the characters' perceptions, of themselves and of each other, are clearly an important feature of uncertainty in Dostoyevsky. Yet, in the end, absence is a misleading metaphor to apply to the fantastic deceits and desires, the spasmodic illuminations, that are equally responsible for preserving the characters' inapprehensibility in the novel. The "ring" of consciousness in Dostoyevsky is as much defined by the nature of the metal surround as by its "absent" centre, so that, in the end, ambivalence in *The Devils* is seen to be concerned with neither presence nor absence so much as with the ongoing movement between the two.

### *Le voyeur*

#### IV. i. The *solus ipse*: this "self in which there is nothing"

In Robbe-Grillet's 1955 novel, the discourse of solipsism has reached a state of refinement inconceivable in a Dostoyevskian context. The narrator of *Notes from Underground*, Dostoyevsky's most solipsistic hero, was at least aware of the existence of other minds even if, after fleeting engagement with them (and attempted manipulation) he withdraws from their difference. In *Le voyeur*, however, the narrator's mental processes are so devoid of social reference points as to seem without personal definition at all, as if in perverse demonstration of Lévinas's rhetorical question: "Si je ne réponds pas de moi, qui répondra de moi? Mais si je ne réponds que de moi, suis-je encore moi?"<sup>70</sup> Confirming a sense of psychological attenuation is the fact that the crime supposedly perpetrated by the hero-narrator is nebulous to the point of unreality (in an esoteric moment Robbe-Grillet once described it as "rien de plus qu'une faille de l'espace et du temps"),<sup>71</sup> while

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<sup>70</sup> The question is, in fact, from the Talmud, which is one starting point for Lévinas's thinking about the other and "le sens de l'humain", in 'Lévinas : au nom d'autrui', p60. This conceptual framework is not one which Robbe-Grillet subscribes to, however.

<sup>71</sup> Cited in *Le roman de l'absence*, p196.

the concept of personal responsibility essential to defining a criminal is undermined throughout the novel by the use of disembodied voices, and the unstable identity of the presumed victim of Mathias's erotomania (Jacqueline/Violette).

This lack of definition is partly a result of the overtly aesthetic function Robbe-Grillet gives to his characters. Their mode of operation as characters is to be seen in relation to the author's creative freedom, and so, as an expression of his inventive humanity first and foremost rather than theirs. This is one reason why the characters in the novel frequently appear less as personalities than as textual leitmotifs which have an aesthetic rather than a psychological coherence. In this respect it is inappropriate to talk about them as 'characters' in the sense of the word used in an analysis of a Dostoyevsky novel. At the same time, however, the style of characterization Robbe-Grillet adopts in *Le voyeur* indicates his departure from traditional ideas about the human personality as a coherent entity. Mathias is the product of a concerted dismantling of all the adornments and eccentricities that define the nineteenth-century Balzacian character, according to Robbe-Grillet, beyond possibility of change. The ambivalence of the characters in *Le voyeur* relates to a problematizing of the identity question, therefore, and not a bypassing of it or a reduction of its problems to 'merely' formal effects. Unlike in some of his later novels Robbe-Grillet appears to maintain the scaffolding of traditional characterization in *Le voyeur*, at the same time as he reorganizes it to suit his own purposes, thus both subverting and rewriting the meaning of "ce terme d'humain".

Mathias is the uncertain shadow that is left when a character is stripped of titles and heredity, property and position. Doubts and a lack of conviction about what he is doing are the signs of a character who is unsure of himself and his place in the world he inhabits. However, as with Dostoyevsky's underground narrator, only in a more extreme sense, the effect of persistent doubt is to destabilize the character concerned to the point where uncertainty becomes a form of psychosis. Mathias appears hopelessly out of control of things and suffers from a paralyzing anxiety that may be only partly accounted for by guilt feelings about a crime that may or may not have been committed. He is obsessed with alibis and the fear that other characters may expose him: Julien and Marie, for instance. And this neurotic uneasiness dominates his speech and behaviour even when these are not obviously related to criminal fears and fancies. He is hesitant in conversation, timorous in plying his trade and a frequent victim of Beckettian misadventures.

Lacking any stable reference point that might anchor these uncertainties, Mathias's



'character' seems to be in limbo outside the boundaries of a rationally articulated doubt, and held in suspension for himself as well as for the reader. This unfinished aspect of Mathias's character, again, recalls some of the evasions by Dostoyevsky's underground man of the defining power of names, attributes and emotions. In both cases, the two novelists' demonstrate the relative importance of the imagination in constructing the personality when this is no longer conceived as a fixed entity. However, the more radical experience of instability in *Le voyeur* and the inventive activity that goes with it, means that the latter is a rather desperate and comfortless affair with none of the brag and boast, or the gibbering excitement, of the underground man's discourse. The 'self', in so far as it exists at all, is a frail construct, put together to meet the needs of the moment. It becomes especially vital to achieve the impression of personal stability, for example, when Mathias is trying to sell his watches. Setting out in pursuit of custom he must create the right mood of confidence to attract a clientele. But:

Sa confiance — fabriquée avec soin, mais trop fragile — en était déjà ébranlée. Il cherchait encore à voir dans ce tremblement — dans cette rature propitiatoire — un gage de succès, il sentait en réalité vaciller sous lui toute l'entreprise. (p52)

And:

A peine lancée, sa bonne humeur mal simulée s'éteignit d'elle-même. (p64)

Robbe-Grillet implies in his essays that the place of artifice is not restricted to the psychology of buying and selling but extends, rather, to all human transactions and behaviour. But if Robbe-Grillet believes, with the existentialists, that man is nothing until he invents himself, he also shows that, having invented himself, man can also be unmade, and not always at will. The novels reveal, in a way the essays cannot, the continued experience of uncertainty that haunts a character for whom identity is an affair of the mind, particularly when others do not respond affirmatively to the identity he projects. This intense psychic insecurity is something I wish to explore more fully in my next chapter. But it needs to be seen first in the context of Robbe-Grillet's technique of characterization and the problem of solipsism this reflects. For, like the teetering structures in a Paul Klee painting, character, and the concept of humanness that informs it in *Le voyeur*, is threatened with imminent collapse. Uncertainty and the imagination thus feed on one another and with often destructive effects. Mentally living out his hypothetical sales-encounters, Mathias suddenly gives in to panic and experiences dizziness after a failed attempt to communicate (did he even get beyond imagining what he was going to say?):

Il s'agissait maintenant de mettre sur pied quelque chose d'un peu moins fantôme. Il était indispensable que les clientes parlent; pour cela il fallait d'abord leur adresser la parole [...] 'Bonjour, Madame, dit-il... Comment allez-vous?' La porte lui claqua au nez. La porte n'avait pas claqué, mais elle était toujours fermée. Mathias éprouva comme un début de vertige. (p38)

It could be argued that this demonstration of instability at least avoids the pseudo-fragmentation of consciousness Robbe-Grillet laments in the traditional novel, where the "calm voice of the novelist",<sup>72</sup> relates and simultaneously expurgates the incoherence of the characters. But it could also be argued that, alongside this gain in terms of psychological 'realism', there is a corresponding loss in terms of breadth of vision so that, in a sense, one simplification replaces another. The circle of consciousness of the main character in *Le voyeur* is never broken into by another voice, whether of another character or a narrator who is not Mathias, so that the reader, as well as Mathias, is trapped and limited by Mathias's neuroses. This raises questions concerning the nature of Robbe-Grillet's representation of otherness in the novel.

#### IV. ii. The separation of hero and world

As suggested in the theoretical introduction to the chapter, Robbe-Grillet is explicit about his intention to preserve the relation of difference and strangeness between the hero in his novels, and the world in which he finds himself:

s'il arrive aux choses de servir un instant de support aux passions humaines, ce ne sera que temporairement, et elles n'accepteront la tyrannie des significations qu'en apparence — comme par dérision — pour mieux montrer à quel point elles restent étrangères à l'homme.<sup>73</sup>

Thus, theoretically speaking, the world in the novel is to be cut free from the web of human interpretation in which it is momentarily entrapped so that it retains its otherness and marks the limits of the hero's solipsistic discourse. Indeed, it is arguably the very positing of such a world which enables the discourse of solipsism to be defined as such for the reader, as if the "connaissance subjective" of humanism is consciously assumed that its arbitrariness may be exposed.

In the preoccupation with "passions humaines" in *Le voyeur*, therefore, the difference between Mathias and the physical world, in which he finds the correlatives of his passion, is constantly affirmed. This is particularly obvious in some of the descriptive passages where things have a cleanness and clarity of line that focusses the attention but

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<sup>72</sup> *Three Decades*, p22.

<sup>73</sup> *Pour un nouveau roman*, pp20-21.

is not immediately suggestive of any particular pattern of significance. Such as when a fine rain purifies the air, for example, and gives things, like the gull, an added brilliance, the moisture acting as a reflector:

On aurait dit [...] que dans cet air lavé les objets les plus proches bénéficiaient d'un supplément d'éclat — surtout lorsqu'ils étaient de couleur claire, comme la mouette. Il avait reproduit non seulement les contours de son corps, l'aile grise repliée [...] mais aussi la commissure sinueuse du bec et sa pointe recourbée, le détail des plumes sur la queue, ainsi que sur le bord de l'aile, et jusqu'à l'imbrication des écailles le long de la patte. (p19)

The object is thus verbalized without being harnessed to any anthropomorphic frame of reference, and this enables it to retain a foreign quality in relation to the narrator-voyeur, that is reproduced in his drawing.

The fact that the physical environment does have certain fixed properties in the novel also means that it occasionally frustrates Mathias's designs: the bar counter, for instance, is too high to permit convenient display of his wares; the bicycle he hires gives him considerable trouble and he has to make a mad rush for the boat which is leaving without him. These details suggest a world not entirely fashioned according to the desires and manias of the narrator. At times, passing awareness of a different order of reality to Mathias's own, is registered by the narrative voice. In the midst of hypothesizing about the ideal sale, it is acknowledged that:

Bien entendu, [Mathias] savait par expérience que les choses se passaient différemment dans la pratique. (p31, cf p178)

Confirming this pattern is the way the novel begins and ends with a near-photographic registering of form, as if to mark off all that comes between as disturbing but arbitrary fantasy that has strayed, for a moment, over the unyielding and foreign surface of things.

For the most part people, too, seem to be treated with a similar detachment to the gull on the post, the registering of form and position taking precedence over analysis of thoughts and feelings. These are sometimes guessed at, but the opaque surface of the face in *Le voyeur*, as opposed to the face of Liza in *Notes from Underground*, gives no clue as to its meaning. When Mathias confronts a prospective client, for example, he tries to guess something of what she is thinking from her facial expression, which, however, "fuyait sans cesse devant les références dans lesquelles Mathias tentait de l'emprisonner". (p40) The other, in the novel, whether material or interpersonal, is represented as radically inapprehensible.

#### IV. iii. The problem of obsession

In effect, however, the inapprehensibility of the other is so radically conceived in *Le voyeur* that differences between self and world, and between self and the interpersonal other, in particular, have no specific meaning. The other is thus negated through a lack of definition which means there is no alternative to the narrator's obsessive perspective on the world. Sado-erotics are the unremitting theme of a fantasy world that displaces, rather than being bracketted off from, a 'real' one. The lining of Mathias's suitcase, for example, seems to be adorned with "de minuscules poupées"; (p23) the discarded crab-claws on the beach recall Mathias's own nails that have dubious connotations in the story; the paraphernalia in a hardware shop is remarkable for a circle of knives around an obscure but sexually suggestive trade-mark, and so on. Because of the repetitive nature of the fantasy, the "creux interdit" in *Le voyeur*, in which a gap in Mathias's timetable signals an interval when he may have raped a small girl, may be filled with less imaginative effort than the gap in Stavrogin's confession.<sup>74</sup> For if Stavrogin's reserve on other occasions may suggest different meanings to the one reader, to pursue Barthes's idea of the writerly text, Mathias's omission suggests, for all its uncertainty, one meaning to many readers.<sup>75</sup>

If the appropriation of objects is consistent with Robbe-Grillet's phenomenological bias, according to which objects are the necessary vocabulary of the mind, the appropriation of other characters in the same way nonetheless makes the representation of 'otherness' in the novel seem superficial. For no distinction seems to be made between things and other minds with their capacity to define, refute, and comment on themselves. In this respect, the narrative of *Le voyeur* could be said to approach Bakhtin's definition of scientific commentary in its "mastery over *mute objects*, [...] that do not reveal themselves in words, that do not *comment on themselves*."<sup>76</sup> Inapprehensibility, it would appear, has the same effect on the hero-narrator's response to the other as absence.

Is, then, "the fact that the individual feels his nature to be different from that of the things and the people which are before him", ultimately irrelevant to this novel? The

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<sup>74</sup> See p216 of *Le miroir qui revient*: "Je n'avais pas lu *Les démons* à l'époque où j'écrivais *Le voyeur*. Tout se passe cependant comme si j'avais voulu reproduire le même creux interdit, la même cavité centrale, le même silence au cœur de mon propre roman, mais en me servant cette fois — ce qui n'est pas le cas chez Dostoïewsky — de ce vide comme générateur du texte entier".

<sup>75</sup> See my next chapter, however, for a discussion of the kind of uncertainty Robbe-Grillet's hero-narrators represent, not so much in relation to other minds as in relation to themselves and their own mental labyrinths.

<sup>76</sup> *The Dialogic Imagination*, p351.

repeated emphasis on Mathias's separation from the rest of the world does appear to entrench the hero more firmly in his fantasies rather than keep him alert to differences around him. Mathias starts the novel "légèrement à l'écart" from other people, and remains so, his isolation from the other characters locking him into an underground as impenetrable as Dostoyevsky's. As was also the case in *Notes*, this seems to be a result, in part, of the nature of the world his author has put him into, which is one rigged against sociability. But where Dostoyevsky makes this an ethical failure Robbe-Grillet presents it in as an ontological given, a condition of one's being in the world. Looking round for the owner of a stray piece of cord at the beginning of the narrative, Mathias finds that "personne ne s'occupait de lui ni de sa trouvaille", (p22) and what is true on this occasion is true throughout. The difference between Mathias and the other constitutes a wall of silence, or of an indifferent miscomprehension, that amounts to the same thing in the end.

The sense of distance between hero and world thus enables the reader to define the hero's discourse as solipsistic, but the lack of significant differences between the hero and the world of other minds gives that discourse a spurious authority. Mathias is never challenged by others about his guilty anxieties. In the middle of inventing alibis for the missing hours in his timetable, for example, Mathias wonders whether it might not be dangerous to falsify any of the details in his account. Maria, the young girl's sister, was in the environs at the time and may have seen him. But Maria only corroborates his story. Julien, another voyeur figure in the novel, is in apparent possession of even more information about Mathias's guilty secret. Yet again, fearing the other's exposure, Mathias finds that Julien only reinforces his own version of events. (See p199: "Tout cela ne faisait, en somme, que renforcer son propre alibi".) Other characters are complicitous in Mathias's fantasies in less subtle ways. Violette/Jacqueline's mother, for example, condemns the girl as a precocious bimbo, who deserves to be burnt at the stake, thus indirectly lending approval to Mathias's proclivities towards violence. Significant in this regard also, is the fact that the girls in the novel are mostly docile and co-operative, described in such terms as "obéissante", "poupée", and as having an "air vulnérable". For these reasons, it may be concluded that the other is only a *potentially* threatening presence in the novel that never actually materializes.

It could even be argued that the opacity of the characters in *Le voyeur* that initially reads as an indication of their otherness is really the key to their ineffectiveness in resisting appropriation. For, as with the "surface lisse" of objects, facial expressions pose pseudo-enigmas that are invitations to invent, not inquire. More explicit in this regard than the example cited above, is the description of the café proprietor's face, which is:

fermée, dure, cireuse, sur laquelle on pouvait lire l'hostilité, ou le souci — ou seulement l'absence — selon les penchants de chacun; on avait aussi bien le droit de lui prêter les desseins les plus ténébreux. (p60)

The other in *Le voyeur* that wears a face that is "fermée" and opaque is also without the necessary attributes to make an impact on the hero's consciousness, becoming instead a mirror of his desires. And if the interpersonal other is thus reduced to a mental construct shaped by the "penchants de chacun", it ceases to be other and becomes a more egocentric possession than all the collective knick-knacks of a Balzacian drawing-room.

Robbe-Grillet's interpretation of phenomenological thinking may thus be seen in this novel to involve an emptying of the other prior to filling the gap between self and other in any way one likes, which, in *Le voyeur*, means according to the limited paradigms of the 'self'. The incompleteness of Mathias's character that is, on one hand, related to his existential uncertainty, may also be related, I believe, to a perceptual and psychological impoverishment as a result of his isolation from other characters, an isolation, however, from which there is no exit. For these reasons I find Robbe-Grillet's representation of otherness in *Le voyeur* unconvincing. The world may be liberated from its nineteenth-century anthropomorphic associations, but only in preparation for its being more closely enmeshed in a narrowly human and individualistic scheme of things. Moreover, it is largely because the world has been emptied of prior social and cultural meanings that it is so vulnerable to the hero-narrator's manipulations. When Robbe-Grillet jokingly concedes that his novels are more subjective than Balzac's,<sup>77</sup> he is right, but not merely because his novels are narrated by a fallible human observer. It is because in a novel such as *Le voyeur* he has silenced the world in which he has put that observer, smoothed its surfaces so they reflect his desires and fears, deflected the shock waves of "cette réalité têtue" <sup>78</sup> that is of as little significance to the hero as it is to Balzac's monomaniacs. Because of a lack of contact with other characters, who, like things, appear to have "rien à l'intérieur",<sup>79</sup> Mathias functions similarly to the character in the tradition of Père Goriot. Consequently, the odd lack of focus initially associated with his character could be compared with the effects of an extremely short range close-up, in which exclusive concentration on the subject matter distorts its nature and all but disguises the fact of its overwhelming presence.

I suggested in my brief analysis of Husserl that the distortion of the self/other relation in Robbe-Grillet may already be implicit in the phenomenological philosophy Robbe-Grillet claims an affinity with. Robbe-Grillet reaches the impasse of solipsism

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<sup>77</sup> *Pour un nouveau roman*, p118.

<sup>78</sup> p18.

<sup>79</sup> p48.

circuitously, however, by radically splitting consciousness into the categories of mind and other, and then emphasizing the former at the expense of the latter. This seems effectively to annul a distinction that could have qualified the solipsistic trend implicit in the phenomenological model. Or is the separation between hero and world in *Le voyeur* already a sign that Robbe-Grillet has no intention of resisting the solipsistic temptation? Volosinov's comments on subjective psychology would suggest that this is a common pattern:

Thus, subjective psychology [...] inevitably leads to dualism, that is, to the splitting up of being into two incompatible aspects — the material and the mental — or leads to a purely *idealistic* monism.<sup>80</sup>

Volosinov would thus argue that the kind of duality we find in a novel like *Le voyeur* is not an attempted evasion of solipsism so much as a manifestation of it. The splitting up of being in the novel into two theoretically interrelated aspects, one of which, however, is deprived of substance, is, in effect, an expression of a subjectivism that already inclines to monomania. The unbalancing of the self/other relation in Robbe-Grillet's novel thus seems to exaggerate the difficulties of perceiving other minds, translating its uncertainties into impossibilities.

### *Djinn*

#### IV. i. The encounter with the other: "l'étrangère"

While each of the works following *Notes* could be said to reflect Dostoevsky's concern with the self/other relation, it is not until *Djinn* (1981) that, in my view, Robbe-Grillet provides his most convincing rendition of the encounter with the "strange being who is precisely the other". After the flamboyant textual games of the 60's and 70's, in *Djinn* Robbe-Grillet returns to a more conventional style of characterization. The illusion of characters as separate entities is maintained, as it was in *Le voyeur*, with the difference that in the later novel, more use is made of interpersonal dialogue. While dialogue is not necessarily reflective of mutual comprehension, or even mutual interest, interaction between characters could be said to provide a deterrent to monomania and a means of keeping discourse about the other, and self, open. As it happens, the encounter between self and other is, according to Robbe-Grillet, one of the central themes in *Djinn*. The drama is presented in all its stages: from the initial awareness of difference, to the reassessment of habits of perception and the inauguration of new ways of thinking and being that emerge from the encounter. As might be expected from Robbe-Grillet's other

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<sup>80</sup> Freudianism: a Marxist Critique, p25.

writings, the new ways of thinking represented in the novel have primarily to do with the free play of the imagination in what is essentially a dream-world. But the narrator's experience of the dreamworld has a lot to do with his encounter with another mind and another way of reading the world that challenges his own. His initiation into the school of fantasy is thus motivated by curiosity and the taste for discovery as well as by the readiness to use his imagination. The other in *Djinn* is not reduced to a passive screen onto which he projects his own reflections.

The narrator-hero's first experience of difference occurs when he meets Djinn at a prearranged rendez-vous near the beginning of the novel. On confronting a trench-coated figure in dark glasses he assumes, on the basis of his knowledge of certain cultural indicators, that the figure is blind and male. In fact, contrary to expectation, the figure is neither blind nor male nor, strictly speaking, human. The 'real' Djinn observes him from elsewhere, and is a woman, while the minion in front of him that resembles Djinn is a robot. His prior assumptions have deceived him and he reacts with surprise: "Ma surprise est si forte que je la dissimule à grand-peine". (p12) Djinn, who is to be his boss on an unspecified mission, also comes to the encounter with "idées toutes faites", which are found to be happily inadequate to the reality of the other: "Vous êtes assez joli garçon, dit-elle, mais vous êtes trop grand pour un Français". (p13) Thus from the very first scene, gentle mockery of conventional readings of the other is implied. The fact that the incident doubles as an introduction to cultural stereotyping, a frequent component of language teaching courses, is a reminder of an original generating motive for the novel, namely, as a text that could be used by French teachers to present problems of grammar and idiom in an accessible literary form. Unlike the lion in Barthes's latin grammar sentence, however, Robbe-Grillet's mythico-grammatical creatures provide a commentary that exceeds their linguistic and cultural definition, the increasingly crazy nature of their embroilments distracting attention from the increasing complexity of the grammar used in narrating them.<sup>81</sup> Robbe-Grillet's reclaiming of the text from its teacherly origins in the Minuit edition further establishes the 'otherness', not so much of his characters in relation to each other, but of the text in relation to its readers. (The Minuit edition adds a prologue and epilogue in which the status of the 'original' American pedagogical text is deliberately fictionalized). On several different levels, then, the other in *Djinn* is shown to exceed the familiarizing boundaries of cultural, psychological and literary categories.

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<sup>81</sup> See 'Le mythe aujourd'hui': "*quia ego nominor leo*. [...] la phrase [...] me dit clairement: je suis un exemple de grammaire destiné à illustrer la règle d'accord d'attribut. [...] elle cherche fort peu à me parler du lion et de la façon dont il se nomme [...]". *Mythologies*, p201.



As one of the protagonists in a love-story (cum thriller, cum science-fiction, cum spoof of all of the above), Djinn is the main representative of an unfamiliar reality in relation to the narrator-hero in the novel. It is with Djinn that Simon Lecœur is chiefly preoccupied because he is attracted to her and because hers is the mastermind behind the odd adventures he engages in. But other characters also help to shake him out of his usual habits of thought, notably the two children, Jean and Marie. Both the children represent a different way of thinking to his own that could be described as whimsical since fanciful games, which force the mind out of its mundane and unimaginative grooves, are of paramount importance in their world. Simon pursues his acquaintance with the children in a strange abandoned building that turns out to be the children's favorite "terrain de jeu", and which is, fittingly in this case, cut off from communication with the outside world. Jean, whom Simon Lecœur meets first, is dressed in period costume, underlining his removal from everyday reality and the place of role-playing in the dimension of reality which he inhabits. Marie, who seems to be the leader of the two, is pert and irrepressibly mendacious. As she muses on the identity of the man in the portrait, Simon has difficulty keeping up with her lively conversation. Like Liza in *Notes*, her responses are always in excess of the narrator-hero's mental calculations:

Mais, en fait, ses réponses déçoivent toujours mon attente. Et, cette fois, elle se contente de rectifier, comme une institutrice corrigeant un élève: 'Péri en mer', ce qui est l'expression juste quand il s'agit d'un naufrage. (p38)

Simon's impression of being a pupil corrected by his teacher is appropriate in the circumstances. For in fact Marie, Jean and Djinn all consecutively assume the role of guide and teacher in this world where there is a "functioning (both of consciousness and of the world) which is not the one with which [Simon is] familiar."<sup>82</sup> These characters are the key to another way of thinking that Simon endeavours to learn. One of the things he observes about this other dimension is that all the usual markers and reference points are either absent or of no use in coming to terms with it. The silence and darkness of the house and its removal from 'normal' human activity seems to transport Simon into another time-frame. He feels "hors du temps". Clock-time is, of course, a significant organizer of experience in Western European culture since the parcelling out of hours and days in an orderly fashion helps create a sense of security and control. Simon faces the problem of orienting himself without such rules of measurement to assist him. Time has no meaning here, and when he asks how long the little boy has been 'dead', Marie replies: "Une heure peut-être, ou une minute, ou un siècle. Je ne sais pas. Je n'ai pas de montre." (p35) Despite this warning, Simon Lecœur keeps on trying to apply rationalist logic to the

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<sup>82</sup> *Three Decades*, p30.

situations in which he finds himself in an effort to remove, or domesticate, some of their strangeness. He tries, for example, to explain the boy's periodic losses of consciousness:

Je saisis, à présent, le sens probable de tout cela: le garçon doit avoir des syncopes fréquentes, sans doute d'origine nerveuse; l'eau froide sur son front sert de révulsif pour le ranimer. (p35)

But as he discovers Jean's "death" is part of an elaborate comedy the children are playing, and Simon is invited to join their magic circle rather than remaining on the outside carrying on the search for explanations. In his acquaintance with the children Simon must leave behind his Cartesian logic (of which Djinn is also critical) and exercise his imagination instead. For instance, the children encourage him to read out his latest "clue" as though he were on stage, and in Chapter 4, Marie instructs him in the art of story-telling.

The process of adjusting to another reality is both fascinating and disturbing. Robbe-Grillet reproduces the feelings of desire and fear that accompany an encounter with the other that Lacan, for example, has formalized in psychoanalytic theory. In erotic relations in particular, says Lacan, the human subject is disturbed, because he "fixes upon himself an image that alienates him from himself".<sup>83</sup> So while Simon Lecœur is under the influence of a "trouble fascination" in Djinn's presence, he also feels alienated and threatened by the world with which Djinn is associated. Particularly when he discovers the seemingly absurd and artificial ruses Djinn employs to communicate with her favoured ones. When he finds out that he and his look-alikes have been listening not to Djinn in the flesh but to a recorded message, he is disconcerted and uneasy:

De nouveau, la méfiance m'a envahi. Je sens comme un danger inconnu, obscur, qui plane sur cette réunion truquée. Cette salle remplie de faux aveugles est un piège, où je me suis laissé prendre... (p79)

Frequently, however, when he abandons himself to this rather hazardous joy-ride, he experiences a sense of liberty and adventure. The constant need to invent as he adjusts his thinking to accommodate the other (Djinn, Marie), is surely the opposite of the obsessive train of thought that characterizes Robbe-Grillet's isolated hero, Mathias. *Le voyeur* and *Djinn* thus offer readers two extreme versions of the difficulties besetting interpersonal relations: an insecure solipsism (*Le voyeur*) or the happy muddle of a highly sociable fantasy party (*Djinn*). At the same time, the lighthearted nature of interpersonal encounters in *Djinn* finds no equivalent in Dostoyevsky's works, where the

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<sup>83</sup> *Ecrits*, p19.

miscomprehensions and incongruities of human relations tend to leave the characters maniacally laughing on the edge of an abyss which Robbe-Grillet's Simon Lecœur euphorically sails over — despite knocks on the head, kidnapping and personality changes.

#### IV. ii. No questions in wonderland?

A possible reservation about the novel from a sceptical point of view, is that although Simon is required to exercise his imagination, and so to make considerable mental effort, asking questions about the other is, on occasions, actively discouraged. As I am assuming here that scepticism about other minds is as much about inquiry as it is about suspended judgement, the old two-headed monster of sceptical reasoning, the rebuke to Simon's inquisitiveness, juxtaposed with the constant invitations to play, suggest an epicurean rather than a sceptical philosophy informing the novel. For example, when Simon asks the young student a string of questions about her identity in relation to his mission he is rebuffed with: "Vous parlez trop", (p24) while Marie makes him feel quite idiotic as he tries to grasp what has happened to her playmate, Jean. Sometimes, it is the dream-like atmosphere of the place that frustrates his attempts at speech:

Mes syllabes tombent, elles aussi, sans éveiller de réponse ni d'écho, comme des objets inutiles, privés de sens. Et le silence se referme. Ai-je vraiment parlé? Le froid, l'insensibilité, la paralysie commencent à gagner mes membres. (p32)

More radically still, the narrator-hero loses consciousness completely on several occasions, either from the effects of enchantment, or because he has been physically coshed on the head, as at the end of Chapter 5 for instance. The goal towards which he is propelled in the novel thus seems to be that of total abandonment of rational control in order to gain entry to a wonderland of riddles and dreams. It is significant in this regard that, after submitting to Marie's orders, he agrees to take up the dark-glasses and cane of a blind-man and to be led about by the young Jean who is more at ease in the dream-world than he is:

Et je me suis vu bientôt, cette fois, obéissant à une gamine de dix ans à peine, menteuse et mythomane de surcroît. En dernier lieu, j'ai fini par accepter de perdre aussi l'usage de mes yeux, après avoir perdu successivement celui de mon libre arbitre et celui de mon intelligence. (p60)

On the other hand, it could be argued that Simon's education in the irrational is in itself an answer to his questions about the other. The phenomenon into which he is inquiring —

Djinn and the world she belongs to — does not belong to any rational scheme and so is better understood by participation. Considered in this light, Simon's questions must be rebuffed because they are misguided, being based on the assumption that full control and comprehension are necessary before he can begin to appreciate another way of being. Simon is being taught to accept uncertainty as an ever-present factor in any equation, and in this respect, he is potentially a far more enlightened being than Peter Verkhovensky from *The Devils* who insists on relating to others in the limited terms of his own understanding. The Pyrrhonian sceptic acknowledges that all inquiries are conducted on data of which it is impossible to be absolutely sure. When Simon admits at the beginning of the novel, "J'aime comprendre ce que je fais", (p19) he speaks for all human beings, whose instinct is to sort everything out before pursuing a given project: an instinct Margaret Wiley has so nicely formulated as man's insistence on "tidying up his world so that he may sit down in it".<sup>84</sup> The uncertainty principle that is introduced into Simon's mind through his encounter with the other, however, would seem to be deliberately not explained away by Djinn or by the implied author of the novel, so that, indeed, inquiry and discovery may be ongoing. Simon is to imitate the pattern described by his author in *Le miroir qui revient* as one befitting "une sorte d'explorateur, résolu, mal armé, imprudent", who questions as well as invents, and always, "à nouveau".<sup>85</sup> Thus epicureanism does not displace, but is combined with, sceptical attitudes in the novel.

A more likely threat to the encounter between different consciousnesses within the novel is Robbe-Grillet's foregrounding of aesthetic conundrums in the later chapters, particularly after the change in narrative voice in chapters 6 and 8 where the reader's attention is solicited to compare different versions of the story and the minor variants within it. In the process our interest is directed away from the characters and towards the novelist, who then becomes the only character of any importance. The difference between self and other fundamental to the experience of strangeness is forgotten in a "jeu d'images" in which both the identity and past experiences of the protagonists are refracted in a host of simulacra. Although doubled identity has been a theme throughout *Djinn* from the very first chapter, by the end of the novel it transpires that all the characters can be connected to Simon, alias Djinn, alias Jane, alias Jean, alias Jeanne, etc.

Nevertheless, even in the latter half of the novel, the voice of Simon Lecœur can still be heard registering bewilderment and annoyance at this complicated "mise en scène". This means there is an outlet for the reader's own possible frustration at this point, at the same time as the illusion of a character grappling with unknown quantities is revived.

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<sup>84</sup> *The Subtle Knot*, p279.

<sup>85</sup> See *Le miroir qui revient*, pp12-13.

Face to face with the ethereal creature calling herself Djinn in Chapter 7, all Simon's desires and fears are reawakened:

Simon était envahi par des sentiments contradictoires. D'une part, cette jeune fille étrange le fascinait et, sans se l'avouer, il redoutait de la voir disparaître; même si elle venait du royaume des ombres, il avait envie de rester près d'elle. Mais, en même temps, toutes ces absurdités le mettaient en colère: il avait l'impression qu'on lui racontait, pour se moquer de lui, des histoires à dormir debout. (p114)

In the Epilogue the reader is left with a trail of question marks about the narrator and the status of the story itself. With the reappearance of Marie on the last page, who "De tous les personnages [...] existe sans nul doute", and is last observed disappearing down the cul-de-sac Vercingétorix, the action seems about to start all over again. The reader is thus discouraged from reducing the text to a piece of aesthetic engineering, and the tale and its characters are allowed to exercise their "trouble fascination" over the readers to the last.

## VI. Conclusion

Scepticism about our ability to know other minds is upheld in Robbe-Grillet's novel *Djinn* yet without its lapsing into the kind of intellectual and imaginative indifference towards the other that assumptions about inapprehensibility seem to entail in *Le voyeur*. Indifference, attempted manipulation and obsession are some of the responses to other minds represented in both Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet's style of characterization, and these suggest the difficulties of interpersonal understanding have become a justification for self-projection. In other words the other is treated as if it were absent, mute, inapprehensible, while the "I" garrulously explores its own fantasies. But Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet's novels also tend to confirm the thesis that fantasy that is not informed by corporate freedoms (*Notes, Le voyeur*), tends to be obsessive and repetitive, and so, a denial of the agility and unfinished aspect of characters more readily associated with a problematic style of writing.

It would be simplistic, however, to see the interpersonal other as the only significant source of difficulty and disturbance in the characters' worlds. Although *Notes from Underground* shows the retreat from the other as a simultaneous retreat from the challenges of "real life", Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet's novels also show the other to be something of a safeguard from the lonely destructiveness of a Stavrogin, for example, or from the dizzying imbalance of a Mathias. The 'other' in the self, the "flaw" in consciousness, which undermines from within, is a problem I wish to explore in my next

chapter.

The significance of the interpersonal other in revolutionizing habitual attitudes, as indicated by Lévinas, may, finally, be emphasized on a paratextual level. It could be argued that the critical impact of Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet's novels, for example, is closely associated with the stylistic idiosyncracies of each author. In other words, the implied author of the novels is the reader's other, seeking to engage with and challenge the norms of the reader's 'text' with its assumptions and preferences. It may be that, on occasions, the novels posit a hypothetical reader we refuse to become, at which point the communication between author and reader, which Wayne C. Booth tells us is the "ultimate problem of the rhetoric of fiction",<sup>86</sup> breaks down. The extent to which we are prepared to engage is perhaps an indication of the extent to which we as readers are prepared to become, as Montaigne phrases it, "tousjours autre d'un autre".<sup>87</sup> It is intriguing to find Donald Marshall suggesting that this distinctiveness, this fascinating and baffling strangeness of another voice, is what also draws readers to the writing of a philosopher like Jacques Derrida. Of the philosopher who wrote that "personne n'est là pour personne", Marshall writes:

in conversation we do not wish simply that our partner be an echo of ourselves, nor do we even seek a mere exchange of experiences and opinions. In conversation, we acknowledge a claim: the point of talking with Derrida is gained by having Derrida be and sound like Derrida. Otherwise, why talk with him at all? The great art of introduction is not the bare bringing together, but finding the few well-chosed words whose offering starts a conversation that can continue of itself. Such a never-stabilized circulation of positions is [...] the excitement of deconstruction.<sup>88</sup>

Although Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet are 'absent' to us, displaced by their texts, yet our conversation with them as readers can, in the manner designated by Marshall, "continue of itself" as the "active (modifying) influence" of another's word on our own.

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<sup>86</sup> *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, p396.

<sup>87</sup> 'Apologie de Raimond Sebond', *Essais, Livre II*, p267.

<sup>88</sup> *Philosophy Beside Itself. On Deconstruction and Modernism*, pxxii.

## 4 The flaw in the case against tragedy

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Une interrogation persiste: est-il possible d'échapper à la tragédie?

Aujourd'hui son règne s'étend sur tous mes sentiments et toutes mes pensées, elle me conditionne du haut en bas. Mon corps peut être satisfait, mon cœur content, ma conscience reste malheureuse. J'assure que ce malheur est *situé* dans l'espace et le temps, comme tout malheur [...] J'assure que l'homme, un jour, s'en libérera. Mais je ne possède de cet avenir aucune preuve. Pour moi aussi, c'est un pari.

(Alain Robbe-Grillet)

### I. i. The case against tragedy

The response of the Pyrrhonist sceptic to suffering is both reasonable and practical. Acknowledging his human susceptibility to adversity he nonetheless attempts to limit the effects of adversity by divorcing the experience of pain from any metaphysical associations. Thus "cold" and "thirst" for Sextus Empiricus are "unavoidable" disturbances, but not threatening to his peace of mind because they are recognized as physical phenomena with no relation to an ethical, spiritual or psychological state of affairs. The ability to make this distinction is what gives the philosopher the advantage, says Sextus Empiricus, over the "ordinary" man:

Two circumstances combine to the detriment of the ordinary man: he is hindered both by the feelings themselves and not less by the fact that he believes these conditions to be evil by nature. The Sceptic, on the other hand, rejects the additional notion that each of these things is evil by nature, and thus he gets off more easily.<sup>1</sup>

Robbe-Grillet pursues a similar line of argument in 'Nature, humanisme, tragédie', where he attacks the metaphysical referent in tragic art. His principle objection is that it clothes human pain with a false sonority, but where Sextus Empiricus sees the "additional notion" of evil as something making suffering more difficult, Robbe-Grillet sees it as a palliative which makes pain easier, by clothing suffering with a spurious meaningfulness and indirectly reminding people of the "good" they have "lost". Robbe-Grillet opens the case against tragedy, therefore, with a quotation from Roland Barthes:

La tragédie n'est qu'un moyen de recueillir le malheur humain, de le subsumer, donc de le justifier sous la forme d'une nécessité, d'une sagesse ou d'une purification [...].<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sextus Empiricus. *Selections from the Major Writings*, p42.

<sup>2</sup> *Pour un nouveau roman*, p45.

This extreme view of tragedy, not just as an explanation but as a justification of human suffering, is a position Robbe-Grillet reaches in the essay by virtue of the following argument. Firstly, he assumes tragedy to be based on a humanistic view of the world which implies faith in a given human nature and in a pre-established universal order. Faith in the givenness of things is, he suggests, accompanied by the conviction that everything shares the same nature and purpose, and that a link may thus be forged between man and world. Secondly, as tragedy is allegedly based on confidence about man's place in a wider scheme of things, conflict, pain and separation need not be seen as calamities but as temporary estrangements from an ideal. Robbe-Grillet then takes his argument further by insisting that the dream of lost unity is so powerful in tragedy that the most radical departures from it are reminders, and even guarantees, of an ultimate reconciliation:

La tragédie apparaît donc comme la dernière invention de l'humanisme pour ne rien laisser échapper: puisque l'accord entre l'homme et les choses a fini par être dénoncé, l'humaniste sauve son empire en instaurant aussitôt une nouvelle forme de solidarité, le divorce lui-même devenant une voie majeure pour la rédemption.<sup>3</sup>

Lastly the emotions associated with tragedy — pity, fear, alienation — are discredited on the grounds that they are fostered by tragedy's covert promise of reconciliation, which is so confidently anticipated, in Robbe-Grillet's view, that the difficulty itself may be read as a back-to-front reflection of it:

Le malheur, l'échec, la solitude, la culpabilité, la folie, tels sont les accidents de notre existence qu'on voudrait nous faire accueillir comme les meilleurs gages de notre salut.<sup>4</sup>

Robbe-Grillet seems to be saying two quite different things in the essay. On the one hand he is representing tragedy as the simplification of a more complex phenomenon. By placing it in a meaningful context (which is passed off as 'natural'), tragedy, he implies, masks the problematic aspects of suffering and encourages acquiescence to it as part of a universal order. Tragedy is not 'tragic' enough. On the other hand, making the preceding argument redundant, Robbe-Grillet asks whether the unhappy consciousness, or, man's 'tragic' disposition, may itself be an illusion based on an erroneous perception of man's situation in the world. Tragedy is an illusion masking another illusion: metaphysical malaise. Cold and thirst are the only "unavoidable disturbances" we have to confront after all.

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<sup>3</sup> pp33-34.

<sup>4</sup> p54.



Robbe-Grillet's essay is the starting point in this chapter for an examination of the representation of suffering in his own and Dostoyevsky's novels. It is immediately obvious that the definition of tragedy given in *Pour un nouveau roman* is a narrow one. Accordingly the first requirement is to emphasize the complexity of a genre which, according to R.P. Draper, "is impossible to define satisfactorily".<sup>5</sup> The link Robbe-Grillet establishes between the terms of the problem and its resolution seems unnecessarily perverse in the light of much Greek, Shakespearian or Racinian tragedy, for example. But the most effective qualification of Robbe-Grillet's essay is provided by his own and Dostoyevsky's novels. Fear and uncertainty in *Les gommes* and *Dans le labyrinthe* highlight the superficiality of dismissing tragic experience as merely the product of philosophical error, while Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* and *The Gambler*, more openly preoccupied with suffering, illustrate the difficulty of explaining or resolving it, despite the strongly metaphysical bias of the former. A preliminary definition of terms postulates what the novels affirm, namely, that tragic vision is not dependent on a given philosophical or metaphysical scheme, being rooted, rather, in an experience that defies schematization, a 'reality' that may also be disconcertingly nebulous, an emotional and imaginative vulnerability that subverts doubts on the rational level.

This vulnerability is clearly not the "unavoidable" disturbance associated in Sextus Empiricus with man's basic physical needs, or with what Philip Haillie, in his introduction to Sextus Empiricus, calls the "massive, unyielding forces of nature".<sup>6</sup> The level of tragic experience I intend to explore in Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet's novels has more to do with the pain of a psychic insecurity, a threat of dissolution associated not so much with the 'other' who is my neighbour as with the 'other' within. From this inner threat, the demands and uncertainties of the interpersonal other provide an almost welcome form of relief — were it not for the fact that this refuge also may be transformed by some alchemy of the mind into a fearful chimera. This is what past writers have often associated with the power of the imagination, and so, with what Montaigne has called "cette liberté de l'imagination et ce desreglement de pensées" which enables man alone among the animals to represent to himself "ce qui est, ce qui n'est pas, et ce qu'il veut, le faux et le véritable [...]".<sup>7</sup> But perhaps "imagination" is too categorical a term for such an elusive phenomenon. Derrida writes in *Marges de la philosophie* of "une certaine altérité" which interferes with the regulated interplay of signs, and to which Freud gives the metaphysical name of the unconscious. Derrida prefers not to name this other except by default and so as *not* "une présence à soi cachée", and "pas plus une 'chose'"

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<sup>5</sup> *Tragedy: Developments in Criticism: a Casebook*, p11.

<sup>6</sup> *Sextus Empiricus. Selections from the Major Writings*, p12.

<sup>7</sup> 'Apologie de Raimond Sebond, *Essais, Livre II*, p126.

qu'autre chose", and yet which "envoie, [...] délègue des représentants, des mandataires [...]".<sup>8</sup> In Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet this susceptibility to something other is almost on as tenuous philosophic and rational grounds as Derrida's "altérité", while the capacity of this "altérité" to throw their hero-narrators off balance with its mandatory interjections is insistently "certaine".

Does this make them gullible perpetrators of the tragic myth? Or unhealthy minds incapable of practising moderation in the face of a groundless uneasiness? Both writers are undeniably fascinated by the processes of unravelling and destruction, and by a perversity, therefore, which Montaigne insists is the true psychic equivalent of the philosopher's interest in contrary arguments.<sup>9</sup> If we pursue Montaigne's idea further, then the practice of moderation of feeling advocated by Sextus Empiricus is better associated with the stoic than the sceptic philosopher for whom doubt and uncertainty are challenges to be relished, not evils to be feared. Furthermore, Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet's readiness to conjure up labyrinths of fear in their writing is closely associated with their strategies of defence. The imaginative faculty that is responsible for generating the "desreglement de pensées" in their novels is made to work backwards, devising verbal patterns and metaphors to contain the fears it has helped generate. In this respect, however deviant in their particularity, the two writers fall back into line with past tragedians as they resort to tragedy's most celebrated antidote to disorder — aesthetic form, to which Dostoyevsky adds a distinctly metaphysical dimension.

#### I. ii. Tragedy as the dramatization of the incongruous

It is reasonable to argue that tragedy is thrown into relief through comparison with an ideal or preferred state of affairs. Some perception of value is fundamental to a sense of loss, outrage and grief. The sacrifice of Iphigenia in Euripides and Aeschylus, for example, is tragic, in part, because it deprives of life a girl who has no desire to leave "this sunlight [...] our dearest love", and destroys a whole family in the round of bitter plotting and revenge that follows her killing. The murder of Shakespeare's Desdemona by Othello, and his own suicide, are all the more poignant for being the bitter fruit of a powerful love, an admirable yet "unwise" passion that has been soured by jealousy. The 'meaningful' context in which these acts are perpetrated, does not mitigate the appalling

<sup>8</sup> *Marges de la philosophie*, p21.

<sup>9</sup> See Montaigne's essay, 'Que nostre desir s'accroit par la malaisance', *Essais, Livre II*. "Il n'y a raison qui n'en aye une contraire, dict le plus sage party des philosophes. Je remachoïs tantost ce beau mot qu'un ancien collègue pour le mespris de la vie: "Nul bien nous peut apporter plaisir, si ce n'est celui à la perte duquel nous sommes preparez. [...] Car il se sent evidement, comme le feu se picque à l'assistance du froid, que nostre volonté s'esguise aussi par le contraste [...]". (p276)

sense of waste involved nor resolve a sense of helplessness and anger provoked by the bungling absurdity of human affairs. One might add to this the arbitrary 'bunglings' by destiny and the gods whose role in tragedy is often to reinforce a sense of futility rather than to clothe suffering with a redeeming sense of purpose. Racine's *Phèdre*, for example, suffers all the agonies of a guilty desire that "le ciel" has seemingly implanted in her and others have helped foster ("Le ciel mit dans mon sein une flamme funeste; La détestable CEnone a conduit tout le reste"). At the end of the play her feelings of resigned defeat to an absurd destiny are unalleviated by metaphysical comfort.

While there are critics who would still affirm tragedy is consolatory in its approach,<sup>10</sup> others see it as the representation of an incongruity rather than the resolution of one. Certainly there is no easy formula for its treatment of suffering. R.P. Draper, while acknowledging a "dual core of suffering and its meaning" at the heart of tragedy,<sup>11</sup> does not interpret this to mean that an explanation is always forthcoming:

Some tragedies do precisely this, but by no means all. The effect of a tragedy may well be to underline the inexplicability of suffering, to ask the question to which no answer is expected:

'Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,  
And thou no breath at all?'<sup>12</sup>

In his meticulously researched *Towards Greek Tragedy* Brian Vickers is even more dismissive of facile definitions of such a "remarkably varied genre". He believes values in Greek tragedy are more often relative than absolute and rarely stated with the kind of confidence that could alleviate the pain involved. There is little evidence, in his view, that the Greeks subscribed to "such a generally agreed concept of cosmic justice", as implied by the Aristotelean terms of "dike" or "hybris", the tragic flaw which "goes hand in hand with belief in a cosmic order".<sup>13</sup> Moreover the suffering that is portrayed in a tragedy may be so intense as to be dehumanizing and, in support of this, Vickers cites B.M.W. Knox's remarks on the extremes of suffering that cannot be satisfactorily translated into language:

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<sup>10</sup> See, in particular, Ekbert Fass's remarks in *Tragedy and After: Euripides, Shakespeare, Goethe*, pp4-5: "In dealing with man's most urgent problems, death and suffering, it brings to a focus the teleological bias of mainstream Western thought. For tragedy [...] is Western man's most daring effort to justify the human dilemma under the guise of some metaphysical scheme. [...] Even suffering and death [...] are shown somehow to serve a meaningful purpose". Note that mention is made of Robbe-Grillet in Fass's chapter on "Post-tragedy".

<sup>11</sup> *Tragedy: Developments in Criticism: a Casebook*, p13.

<sup>12</sup> p12.

<sup>13</sup> *Towards Greek Tragedy*, pp25-26, 30.

There is a pitch of physical suffering which words are inadequate to express, and when human beings reach it they make sounds like animals, which convey nothing but the extremity of their pain.<sup>14</sup>

Tragedy, then, does not always provide answers or even expect them, and the most that can be said is that it still, perhaps, reflects the need to ask why, to exclaim at and therefore not acquiesce to the suffering that is so inextricable a part of the human picture. This appears to be the only consistent 'proof' of tragedy's alleged affirmatory aspects.

### I.iii. The 'flaw' of consciousness

As well as encompassing a variety of contemporaneous works tragedy needs to be defined to accommodate changing perspectives in art and its cultural context. Although separated by a century, Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet arguably belong to a novelistic era in which attention tends to be focussed more on private dramas of the mind than on characters interacting on the wider stage of society. "Greek tragedy", suggests one critic, "has its meaning realised in the action", while in the dramas of Chekhov and Beckett, "the mental world fills the stage, and action reaches a condition of frustrated stasis".<sup>15</sup> While interpersonal action is of major importance in Dostoyevsky the private world of his characters often dominates the narratives and makes action, and especially interaction with others, intensely problematic.

The irritable intelligence of Dostoyevsky's underground man exemplifies the withdrawal into the vertiginous world of the consciousness witnessed in some contemporary tragedies and brought to its most extreme form of expression in Beckett's *Molloy* trilogy, for example. Like the anonymous voice in *L'innommable*, the underground man's capacity for reflection seems paradoxically to reveal that he has no self that can be reflected on. Having isolated himself from others, and being without a set framework for thought and action, he feels devoid of identity and conscious, as it were, only of his consciousness. "Tragic flaw" is too definite a term for this kind of precarious selfhood. But the underground man's state of limbo is represented, in the first part of the novella at least, as a more insidious agony than that experienced by the man of action or the man of passion whose projects help define them and give them a sense of purpose. The narrator's

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<sup>14</sup> p66. cf Montaigne's remarks in 'De la tristesse' and his reference in this instance to the Roman poet, Ovid, whose heroine is turned to stone, in both literal and figurative senses, because of her pain: "Voilà pourquoi les poètes feignent cette misérable mere Niobé, ayant perdu premierement sept fils, et puis de suite autant de filles, sur-chargée de pertes, avoir esté en fin transmuée en rochier, *Diriguisse malis*, pour exprimer cette morne, muette et sourde stupidité qui nous transit, lorsque les accidens nous accablent surpassans nostre portée". (*Livre II*, p44)

<sup>15</sup> *Tragedy: Developments in Criticism: a Casebook*, p15.

freedom of definition and his heightened self-awareness rob him of such ready-made meaningfulness, representing a crippling source of weakness as well as a potential means of transcending the limits constraining the so-called "ordinary" man.

The combination of freedom with a capacity for reflection and a psychic vulnerability, with making and with unmaking, constitutes a significant meeting point between Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet's view of the consciousness — more so than their perception of how this consciousness interrelates, or ought to interrelate, with other minds. A viable theoretical touchstone for their mutual linking of incompleteness, freedom and creativity may be found in the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, whom Robbe-Grillet openly berrates in his essay 'Nature, humanisme, tragédie' for the former's complicity in tragic malaise. For in Sartre the gap between the consciousness (*pour-soi*) and the physical world of objects in which it finds itself (*en-soi*) is experienced in terms of "nausea", as the "pour-soi" covets the fixed nature of the "en-soi" which is like, yet unlike, itself. Free to define itself and yet unable to author its own identity in any comparably permanent form, the "pour-soi" remains uneasily aware of its unremitting obligation to choose: "la liberté qui se manifeste par l'angoisse se caractérise par une obligation perpétuellement renouvelée de refaire le *Moi* qui désigne l'être libre".<sup>16</sup> If the association of freedom with anguish is something Robbe-Grillet rejects in the essay on tragedy, and if the Sartrean equation of nothingness with freedom is consequently less equivocal in Robbe-Grillet than in Sartre, Robbe-Grillet's novels nonetheless reveal the enduring ambivalence of imaginative freedom. As Olga Bernal suggests, linking the two writers in her analysis of Robbe-Grillet's *Dans le labyrinthe*, "Le 'pour-soi' sartrean est une fissure dans la surface robbe-grilletienne. La fissure est une image de détresse [...]".<sup>17</sup> Hence the anti-space of the mind, Wallas's "deux millimètres carrés de rêve", is what permits Robbe-Grillet's characters to hypothesize and dream outside the boundaries set by convention. But, at the same time, the anguish that is denied philosophic credibility in *Pour un nouveau roman*, reasserts itself in the characters' anxious search for clues and reassurance in the labyrinths of Robbe-Grillet's narratives.

In Dostoyevsky's case there is a considerably more positive assessment of the self/other relationship, for example, than there is in Sartre, for whom other selves are always and of necessity reduced by the perceiving consciousness "to the status of an object".<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Dostoyevsky's understanding of the development of the consciousness is

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<sup>16</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, p72, cited in 'The presentation of consciousness in Sartre's *La nausée* and its theoretical basis: reflection and facticity', p119.

<sup>17</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet: *le roman de l'absence*, p122.

<sup>18</sup> 'The presentation of consciousness in Sartre's *La nausée*...', p123. See my Chapter 3 for a discussion of the self/other relation in Dostoyevsky.

significantly influenced by his belief in the importance of this relationship. Nevertheless, in Dostoyevsky's 1869 novel, *Myshkin*, the most charitably disposed of all Dostoyevsky's characters and the most open to the needs and demands of others, is prey to gloomy fears and paralyzed by a sense of alienation from others and from the paradisiacal dream in which he longs to be caught up. He, too, therefore, experiences the vertiginous freedom of consciousness that is at once a source of uneasiness and an incentive to create and to dream.

Hence, where the previous chapter looked at the phenomenon of incompleteness in terms of a capacity to respond to other minds, the present chapter examines the same phenomenon in terms of a capacity for imaginative reflection and as the ability, therefore, to construe an imaginary other, an imaginary self, an imaginary world. While this capacity may be seen as a means of overcoming tragedy through the creation of alternative patterns of significance, it is also the weak link in the mind's defences against tragedy, the 'flaw' in consciousness that is a permanent reminder of its inadequacy and need:

et s'il est ainsi que [l'homme] seul, de tous les animaux, ait cette liberté de l'imagination et ce deresglement de pensées, luy representant ce qui est, ce qui n'est pas, et ce qu'il veut, le faux et le veritable, c'est un avantage qui luy est bien cher vendu et du quel il a bien peu à se glorifier, car de là naist la source principale des maux qui le pressent: peché, maladie, irresolution, trouble, desespoir.<sup>19</sup>

In Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* this "liberté de l'imagination et ce deresglement de pensées" is of primary importance in understanding the nature of the characters' personal narratives.

### *The Idiot*

#### II. i. Suffering and the "additional notion of evil"

All the extremes of tragic experience Robbe-Grillet refers to in his essay, "Le malheur, l'échec, la solitude, la culpabilité, la folie",<sup>20</sup> are present in Dostoyevsky's 1869 novel: Myshkin suffers from epilepsy and Ippolit is dying from consumption; Rogozhin is animated by a "morbid passion" consummated in the murder of Nastasya; Nastasya is an outcast from society and there are hints she is bordering on insanity in the latter part of the novel. Throwing these calamities into relief, and as if in confirmation of the "tragic" pattern Robbe-Grillet traces, is the novel's metaphysical hero, Prince Myshkin. "Prince

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<sup>19</sup> 'Apologie de Raimond Sebond', *Essais, Livre II*, p126.

<sup>20</sup> *Pour un nouveau roman*, p54.

Christ", as Dostoyevsky referred to him in his notebooks for the novel,<sup>21</sup> thus drawing attention to the redemptive vision with which the novels' main character is intentionally associated. Through Myshkin, suffering is to be represented alongside the promise of its cure or, to use Robbe-Grillet's metaphors, the file for divorce is to be read in conjunction with the plan for reconciliation.

The coexistence of these two possibilities in the novel, and the inference that some form of "malaise" is endemic to the human condition, suggests a close resemblance with the scenario envisaged in 'Nature, humanisme, tragédie'. The obvious interest of Dostoyevsky himself in the phenomenon of suffering and its functioning in nearly all his characters' lives, from the underground man (as a source of stimulus) to the heroes of his last novel (Mitya, as a path of redemption), further confirms the suspicion that his characters may be imprisoned in a "malédiction ronronnante". Nevertheless, the interrelationships between light and darkness, beauty and terror are shown in *The Idiot* to be extremely complex, as if to equally demonstrate that it is in the avoidance of the "additional notions" of good and evil, and not in their exploration, that the easier path lies. The tragic pattern in Dostoyevsky's *Idiot* is one of "malheur" yet without the certainty of Robbe-Grillet's "gage du salut".

This reaction is one which seems to be shared both by the novels' enthusiasts and its more sceptical detractors. Panichas, for example, who admires Myshkin as "a commanding presence", a "radical and provocative" character, nonetheless describes this as the "most terrifying" of Dostoyevsky's works:

it is the least protective or comforting [...] No utterly redemptive figure here appears to cushion spiritual contradictions, ambiguities, doubts, ambivalences, shocks. [...] For here the experience of terror is superior even to Myshkin, who is preeminently Dostoyevsky's most Christ-like symbol.<sup>22</sup>

Keller, more cautious, sees Myshkin as a "good" character with a "host of noble qualities", but although he begins his essay by suggesting Myshkin is not "condemned to failure at the start of the novel", he ends it by saying Myshkin's "inability to communicate" and his "real lack of understanding", "ultimately destroyed not only himself but his mission".<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Dalton in her psychoanalytic reading of *The Idiot* points out that Myshkin even contributes to the problems he is supposed to resolve (the "abyss of meekness that accepts everything and resists nothing is a seduction to loss of

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<sup>21</sup> See pp198, 201, 205 of *The Notebooks for 'The Idiot'*.

<sup>22</sup> *The Burden of Vision*, pp51 and 55 respectively.

<sup>23</sup> 'Prince Myshkin: success or failure?', pp17 and 22.

control"),<sup>24</sup> and she concludes, as a result, that the meaning of the novel "resides in the tension and conflict rather than in the resolution".<sup>25</sup> Simon Lesser is another who uses a psychoanalytic framework for his interpretation while representing the opposite extreme of reaction to Panichas. He damns outright both Myshkin's character and his role as a redeemer figure in the novel:

Myshkin's goodness, his moral masochism, rests on a denial of his lusts and hatreds; it is an extension of his personal or, using the term broadly, his sexual masochism. A man whose goodness has this kind of underlying structure can be an active and wholly credible agent of destruction.<sup>26</sup>

Whatever the particular bias no one reading of the novel makes a straightforward connection between the novels' teleological element and a resolution, or even a softening, of its problems. On the contrary, Myshkin is sometimes seen as a complicating factor in the novels' tragedies. Starting, then, with the assumption that suffering and redemption in *The Idiot* are at least problematic and only uneasily related terms, I wish, building on previous critical readings, to offer an additional account of the difficulties which confront the novel's main character and in which he is in some measure complicitous. The notion of a "flaw" in consciousness will be explored to this end with reference to the characters' constant changeability and their susceptibility equally to dreams of beauty and the kind of nightmare related by Ippolit. The reptilian horror that dominates Ippolit's nightmare is a reminder that the problem of consciousness in the novel is not merely an abstract one of definition nor an ethically neutral one of realizing man's sundry potentialities. It is a reminder that for Dostoyevsky the mind of man is sometimes a "dark place", that the flaw of consciousness is sometimes also a disfigurement. I will begin my discussion therefore by considering the characters' perverse attachment to the "additional notion of evil" which puts them as much out of reach of the sage optimism of philosophy as it sets them against the spiritual imperatives of faith.

## II. ii. The love of suffering: "une sublime nécessité"?

One of the most blatant obstacles to redemption in the novel is that the characters are shown to be suffering, in part, willingly. Their personal tragedies are ones they have

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<sup>24</sup> *Unconscious Structure in 'The Idiot'*, p77. (cf Leatherbarrow in *Fedor Dostoevsky*, p96: "[...] Myshkin's naïveté destroys the lives of Rogozhin [...] and Nastasya Filippovna [...] Myshkin's compassionate admiration for Nastasya Filippovna provokes the jealous Rogozhin first to an assault on the Prince himself, and then [...] to the murder of Nastasya Filippovna. Faced with the awareness of his own complicity in the tragedy, Myshkin lapses again into idiocy".)

<sup>25</sup> p145.

<sup>26</sup> 'Saint and sinner — Dostoyevsky's *Idiot* — 1958', p390.



helped to author themselves so that they are adding to suffering not so much the additional burden of a metaphysical anxiety as the additional inducement of pleasure in pain. The novel thus appears to bear out Robbe-Grillet's judgement of tragic vision according to which:

Il n'est plus question de rechercher quelque remède à notre malheur, du moment que [la tragédie] vise à nous le faire aimer.<sup>27</sup>

As Dostoyevsky indicates, however, the tendency to glorify suffering is not necessarily dependent on tragic humanism or any other philosophic perspective. It appears to grow from a muddle of perversity (although its interpretation as perversity implies some normative frame of reference) in the "animal malade" itself, which neither Dostoyevsky's metaphysical hero, nor the optimistic philosopher implicit in Robbe-Grillet's essay, is able to accommodate or overcome.

Nastasya, for example, sustains a real wound to her personal integrity because of her exploitation as a girl by Totsky. She bears a social stigma because of his mistreatment, being subjected to either moralizing disapproval or a glamorizing acceptance of her role as a 'fallen woman'. Nevertheless, in a spirit of revenge, on others and herself, or as a means, perhaps, of anticipating and controlling society's judgement, or for neither of these reasons, Nastasya often embraces the role she despises, wilfully imprisoning herself in a fatal pattern of behaviour. When Rogozhin comes to bid for her favours, declaring his passion with the same recklessness with which he throws down the rolls of money, Nastasya encourages him in his degradation of himself and, implicitly, of her. ("The scene was becoming more and more disgusting, but Nastasya Filippovna went on laughing and did not go, as though she were deliberately prolonging it".) (p136) Ganya, who is engaged to Nastasya at the time of this exhibitionism, displays a similar perversity by storing up Nastasya's disdain for his family, and exploding irritably when the latter pay too close attention to his possible feelings and motives:

The note of irritation in Ganya's voice had reached that pitch when a man is almost glad to let himself go and give himself up to it without restraint and almost with ever increasing delight, regardless of any consequences. (pp122-123)

Ganya's offence at having the nerve endings of his pride exposed turns into a vicious gesture that is as much designed to hurt himself as his imagined persecutors. Lastly, Ippolit, severely weakened by the physical ravages of consumption and the nervous apprehension that accompanies awareness of approaching death, suffers major "unavoidable disturbances". But his experience of pain becomes, by the same twist of

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<sup>27</sup> *Pour un nouveau roman*, p55.

perversity observable in the other characters, a dramatic gesture that is necessary to his self-esteem. After a grand public tirade against the terms of his existence Ippolit suddenly recoils, humiliated by the thought of appearing a fool in front of others and angry at Myshkin's sympathetic comprehension of his confusion:

I 'd kill you, if I remained alive! I don't want your benefactions, I won't accept anything from anyone — do you hear? — not from anyone! I was delirious and you've no right to triumph! May you be damned, every one of you, for ever and ever. (p314)

To accept Myshkin's compassion as salve for his grief would necessitate abandoning the self-posturing that is Ippolit's main defence against it. But Ippolit chooses not to abandon the suffering self he has become, withdrawing into its protective familiarity and observing with fascinated interest all its gradations of feeling. In so doing, he gives some credence to Florovksy's interpretation of the love of suffering as "a kind of delirium, a self-erotic obsession, a spiritual narcissism", where suffering, with its reminder of the individual's capacity for pain, becomes a means of exacerbating the character's self-preoccupation.

The relation of Ippolit's suffering to what Jackson has similarly called an "aggressive imperialism of the ego"<sup>28</sup> complicates the nature of Dostoyevsky's affinity with the Russian kenotic tradition, according to which suffering "in and of itself may be transforming and salvific".<sup>29</sup> An obsession with the theme of suffering and its redemptive powers undoubtedly runs through Dostoyevsky's œuvre showing him, in the manner of Robbe-Grillet's tragic humanist, to be acquiescent to something from which Robbe-Grillet (the essayist) seeks unqualified liberation. But Dostoyevsky shows in *The Idiot* that suffering is not always a redeeming experience. It is accompanied by a "kenotic" humility in Myshkin but in other characters it is an arena for maniacal self-reflection. Thus, while Myshkin is profoundly attracted to Nastasya and Rogozhin because of their suffering, his interest is accompanied by a concern for their release from what is clearly a destructive unhappiness.<sup>30</sup> If, then, there is a degree of "fascination with suffering" in Myshkin (Keller) and even a certain "moral masochism" (Lesser) the nature of human responses to suffering in the novel is more varied and complex than either of these judgements allow.

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<sup>28</sup> 'Dostoevskij and the Marquis de Sade', p32.

<sup>29</sup> 'Fullness and emptiness: the development of a Russian spiritual vision', p351.

<sup>30</sup> See p247: "Was not Rogozhin capable of freedom and happiness? [...] Yes, yes! Rogozhin was not quite fair to himself; he had a great heart that was capable of suffering and compassion"; and p538: "what do my grief and my troubles matter, if I have the power to be happy? [...] think how many beautiful things there are at every step, things even the most wretched man cannot but fail to find beautiful!".

Certainly it is too complex for Myshkin, as the characters' perversity puts them out of reach of his simple faith and beyond the grasp of his conscious understanding. In Myshkin, Dostoyevsky has perhaps too successfully portrayed the "truly perfect" and beautiful man,<sup>31</sup> since the innocence that is the guarantee of Myshkin's particular beauty seems to be accompanied by an ignorance that leaves him without a common language to communicate with the other characters. Myshkin's naïve dreaminess is an impenetrable defence against the contradictory mix of malice and generosity, for example, in Aglaia's jokes about Nastasya — "how could such a genuine and beautiful feeling be combined with such obvious and malicious mockery?", he asks himself — (p269) and blinds him to the jealousy he provokes in Aglaia by making her the confidant of his feelings for Nastasya. As Aglaia observes with some exasperation:

With your quietism one might live happily for a hundred years. Whether one showed you an execution or a little finger, you'd be quite sure to draw highly laudable conclusions from either, and remain happy and contented, too. To live like that is easy. (p85)

Myshkin thus attempts to combat the moral ambivalence of his world through bypassing it as if it were possible to step directly into the radiance of an earthly paradise and take the other characters with him. But by failing to sufficiently acknowledge the reality of their vices he offers no bridge of passage between their condition and his own unattainable purity. Forgiveness is preceded in Christian orthodoxy by an acknowledgement of sin, or, by what Hartman in a non-theological context has referred to as the "wording" of a wound,<sup>32</sup> the simultaneous naming and purging of a spiritual sickness. But Myshkin does not forgive so much as excuse, as if to trivialize offences of which the characters themselves are acutely conscious. As Ippolit wryly observes of Myshkin's response to Lebedyev's part in writing a defamatory article about him, "the prince will most certainly forgive him, [...] He may even have thought of an excuse for him. Haven't you, Prince?". (p306) It is due to this naïve idealism more than to any obscure masochistic impulse, that Myshkin is helpless before the "volupté" of suffering in the novel. For idealism creates an irredeemable gulf between sin and regeneration, infecting desire with bitterness so that, if anything, it is the other characters who are cast in a sado-masochistic role in relation to Myshkin. Ippolit's repulsion of the Prince's compassion may be better understood from this perspective. For on the one hand, Myshkin represents the love Ippolit himself longs for in his dream of reconciliation, but on the

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<sup>31</sup> See *Letters of Fyodor Michailovitch Dostoevsky to his Family and Friends*, pp142-143.

<sup>32</sup> *Saving the Text*, p133. cf Murray Krieger's remarks on Myshkin in *The Tragic Vision*: "[...] Myshkin has refused to give his beloved humanity the human privilege of sinning, of being offensive and arousing moral indignation." (See pp220-223.)

other, Myshkin's impossible and indiscriminating niceness puts that dream out of reach so that, following a typical Dostoyevskian pattern, it becomes the spawning ground for cynicism and vengeful hatred — "I hate you more than anyone and more than anything in the world — you jesuitical, treacly soul, you damned idiot, you philanthropic millionaire, you!". (p314)

In this respect Dostoyevsky's metaphysical hero places an additional pressure on the other characters. But this pressure does not come through his promising a "récupération finale de toutes les distances, de tous les échecs, de toutes les solitudes, de toutes les contradictions".<sup>33</sup> It comes, rather, through the attempt to deny these distances and contradictions through adherence to the quietist view that man has only to tell himself he is happy in order to be so. For this reason Myshkin ironically approaches Robbe-Grillet's own position at the end of his essay on tragedy where the latter insists we must learn to identify "ce qui ne l'est pas [séparé], ce qui *est un*, puisqu'il est faux que tout soit double [...]".<sup>34</sup> There is a sense in which both Myshkin, the character, and Robbe-Grillet, the essayist, attempt to circumvent tragedy by denying the gravity of its wounds.

## II. ii The flaw

On one level, then, Myshkin represents a remote and untouchable icon. On another, however, he is brought very close to the other characters and as a result, closer to the mediatory role suitable to a redeemer figure. For Dostoyevsky bestows on his innocent Prince the humanizing qualities of changeability, and of an imaginative susceptibility to the darkness and doubts, the "double thoughts", which his idealizing self refuses to acknowledge. Through the susceptibility of his imagination the Prince, too, is confronted with his freedom and hence the "obligation perpétuellement renouvelée de refaire le *Moi* qui designe l'être libre". And because of this freedom Myshkin finds himself a stranger to the adamant perfection of his own idealism, and his choice of the good is subjected to the temptations and pressures of change.

A curious resemblance is set up between Myshkin and Ippolit, with Myshkin sharing in Ippolit's anguished longing to be rescued from mutability. In a public confession Ippolit has expressed a desire to triumph, once and for all, over the insidious spiritual depression that heralds his death, attacking his mind with fearful images. He decides, by an effort of will, to close his mind to such "humiliating forms":

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<sup>33</sup> *Pour un nouveau roman*, p60.

<sup>34</sup> p67.

It is impossible to go on living when life assumes such grotesque and humiliating forms. [...] I cannot submit to a dark power which assumes the form of a tarantula. And it was only at dusk, when I felt at last that I had reached the final phase of full determination, that I felt better. (p422)

However, as the scene which follows attests, a “final phase of full determination” is as unattainable as Myshkin’s visions, so long as Ippolit’s consciousness continues to function, and the imagination continues with it to be swayed by inexplicable feelings and premonitions. Ippolit’s plan to assert his will by committing suicide is a failure as he is twice betrayed by the flaw of consciousness — by the fear that makes him faint as if already dead, and by the instinctive recoiling from death which earlier prevented him (it is not certain) from putting the cap in the pistol so that it does not fire at the crucial moment. (pp430-431) Ippolit’s will for a lasting defence against his “existential” mutability would appear to have been sapped by the same unconscious mechanisms that slay the man on the scaffold in Montaigne’s anecdote:

Il y en a qui, de frayeur, anticipent la main du bourreau. Et celui qu’on debandoit pour luy lire sa grace, se trouva roide mort sur l’eschafaut du seul coup de son imagination.<sup>35</sup>

After Ippolit has collapsed following his failed suicide attempt, Myshkin walks alone in the park and continues a train of thought Ippolit has initiated in his confession about the “gnat buzzing in the sunlight” and in comparison with which he feels “an outcast”:

A bird was singing in a tree above him and he began looking for it among the leaves; suddenly the bird took wing and flew away, and at the same moment he, for some reason, recalled the ‘gnat’ in ‘the hot sunshine’ about which Ippolit had written that ‘it knew its place and took part in the general chorus’, but he alone was ‘an outcast’. This sentence had struck him forcibly at the time; he remembered it now. A long-forgotten memory stirred in his mind, and suddenly it all came back to him clearly.

It had happened in Switzerland. [...] Before him was the brilliant sky, below — the lake, and around, the bright horizon, stretching away into infinity. He looked a long time in agony. He remembered now how he had stretched out his arms towards that bright and limitless expanse of blue and had wept. What tormented him was that he was a complete stranger to all this. What banquet was it, what grand, everlasting festival, to which he had long felt drawn, always — ever since he was a child, and which he could never join [...] every ‘tiny gnat’ buzzing round him in the hot sunshine [...] knows its place [...] Everything has its path, and everything knows its path, [...] only he knows nothing, understands nothing, neither men nor sounds, a stranger to everything and an outcast. (pp433-434)

In his imagination the Prince can follow that bird and touch that “bright and limitless expanse of blue”. But he, like Ippolit, remains outside their coveted beauty in an in-between state of becoming where he is vulnerable, also, to the darker promptings and

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<sup>35</sup> ‘De la force de l’imagination’, *Essais, Livre I*, p143.

murderous thoughts of Rogozhin. Because of his proximity to Rogozhin, through friendship, and through the desire to understand and love, Rogozhin's morbid fancies have the power to infect Myshkin's imagination so that he, too, dreams of murder and of knives. Without losing his ethical distinctness from the other characters, therefore, it is nonetheless clear that Myshkin shares their susceptibility to the vicissitudes of his mind and emotions. Unlike the "tiny gnat" that "knows its path", instinctively and unswervingly, he is not invulnerable to change, even though he may wish, after the poet, that he "past changing were, Fast in thy Paradise".<sup>36</sup> To some purpose, therefore, Kolya remarks to Myshkin, "You're an awful sceptic, Prince!", but it is made clear that this scepticism is not because of any conscious alteration in attitude on Myshkin's part. It is because of his painful vulnerability to other's moods and impulses, and his ability, therefore, to lose himself, through a partly subconscious act of identification, in the "dark places" of others' minds. There is a sense in which he is, as Kolya implies, "beginning to disbelieve in everything", because he is "imagining all sorts of things". (p328)

### III. iii. The "twilight of nothingness"<sup>37</sup>

The Prince's imaginative sensitivity is thus the means by which he becomes intimately involved in the tragedies of the other characters as well as experiencing on his own account all the agonies of mutability. The flaw of consciousness, in this respect, seems inextricably associated with suffering. But what then exacerbates this suffering, and transforms it from a vague existential malaise into something more threatening, is the perception in the novel of some malignant force, some cosmic sickness, that is contributing to the characters' insecurities and weakening both the force of Myshkin's compassion and the ability of the other characters to respond to it. Into the locatable perversities of the characters is read evidence of a more universal problem, a pall of darkness of which the "darkness" of Rogozhin is only a part. This concern with a nameless threat confirms that the "néant" of consciousness to which Robbe-Grillet refers is not a void in Dostoyevsky that can be inscribed at will, so much as an area of undecidability defined by fearful boundaries. Equally it indicates that the question of suffering and "additional notion" of evil in *The Idiot* is not reduced to a question of "good" and "bad" characters, despite the obvious symbolic contrast between Myshkin and Rogozhin. Although each responds differently, neither Myshkin's compassion nor Rogozhin's aggressive sensuality succeeds in neutralizing the oppressive sense of evil — the "void of nothingness which exists,

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<sup>36</sup> From George Herbert's 'The Flower'.

<sup>37</sup> A term from Florovsky's chapter on evil in *Creation and Redemption*.

which swallows or devours beings"—<sup>38</sup> which the novel seems concerned to communicate.

This "twilight of nothingness" that actively disturbs and threatens the characters' well-being is given symbolic form in Ippolit's dream as a venomous insect "in the shape of a trident". (p401) The description of the repulsive invertebrate scuttling about Ippolit's room gives a lurid Boschean realism to the apprehension of evil that turns his approaching death into a thing of horror rather than a strictly physical phenomenon that is part of the 'natural' order of things. Soon after relating this nightmare Ippolit makes another attempt to crystallize the fears that haunt him, this time with reference to the image of a painting that has already been mentioned in a conversation between Myshkin and Rogozhin. Like one Dostoyevsky himself had seen and been disturbed by, the painting depicts Christ after he had been taken from the cross, still bearing the disfiguring marks of his crucifixion. By concentrating on the uglier material facts of death the canvas offers a physical counterpart to the horrors that prey on Ippolit's mind. Ippolit makes a mental connection, however, between the physical and the metaphysical so the two converge in his perception of the painting to the point where they are almost indistinguishable:

it is nature itself [Garnett translates this as "It is simply nature"], and, indeed, any man's corpse would look like that after such suffering. [...] In the picture the face is terribly smashed with blows, swollen, covered with terrible, swollen and blood-stained bruises [...] as one looks at the dead body of this tortured man, one cannot help asking oneself the peculiar and interesting question: if such a corpse [...] was seen by all His disciples [...] then how could they possibly have believed, as they looked at the corpse, that that martyr would rise again? Here one cannot help being struck with the idea that if death is so horrible and if the laws of nature are so powerful, then how can they be overcome? [...] Looking at that picture, you get the impression of nature as some enormous, implacable, and dumb beast, or, to put it more correctly [...] as some huge engine of the latest design, which has senselessly seized, cut to pieces, and swallowed up — impassively and unfeelingly — a great and priceless Being [...]. (p419)

In its transformation of the "simply natural" into the "dumb beast" of nightmare that crushes and "swallows up" the "priceless Being" the passage provides a clear example of the extent to which Dostoyevsky departs from the recommendations of Pyrrhonist scepticism. He neither confines himself to the observation of physical details nor encourages moderation of feeling in the face of the "non-evident things" superimposed on the "evident things" he is depicting. Furthermore his choice of figurative language indicates that certain feelings are being evoked to the exclusion of others, so that the metaphysical picture is also an unbalanced one. Neither the painting nor the nightmare, which reads like a scenario for a contemporary horror-movie, leave any space for the

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<sup>38</sup> *Creation and Redemption*, p84. See also Florovsky's specific reference to Dostoyevsky on p89.

resurrection of hope, or, for the "consolation du possible" Robbe-Grillet refers to in *Les gommes*. Is Dostoyevsky, then, in his eagerness to acknowledge the power of the nameless fears which oppress the spirit, perhaps mesmerized, and more than a little fascinated, by the spectacle he has conjured up — going to the opposite extreme, in fact, to Robbe-Grillet's one of understatement and evasion in the essay on tragedy?

Because of the recurrence of a certain type of morbid imagery with its emphasis on unpleasant physical detail (the wriggling movement of the insect, its terrifying proximity and venom are described repeatedly), and some macabre twists at the end of the narrative, Dostoyevsky indeed appears to be as complicitous as his characters in the tragic myth. In the attempt to convey the reality of evil and so to give form to what is intangible and too glibly dismissed, Dostoyevsky often fails to then disengage from the spectres he conjures up or to dwell with equal conviction on alternative, more hopeful visions. Myshkin is, without doubt, a permanent reminder of innocence in the novel but he is too frail and too fearful, also, to offer a very reassuring defence against the horrors that strain the characters' sanity to the limits of endurance. It is thus not so much through representing divorce as a "voie majeure pour la rédemption" that Dostoyevsky acquiesces to suffering in *The Idiot* as through his representing one term of the human dilemma at the expense of another, darkness all but overpowering and extinguishing light. In this respect, the novel is in danger of forfeiting the quality of uncertainty I associated with tragedy in the introduction to the chapter, and of slipping, instead, into the mire of fatalism.

Nevertheless, Dostoyevsky offers a significant escape route from the pessimistic deadlock he creates in the novel. By emphasizing the mind's susceptibility to illusion and, hence, the unreliability of its judgements, Dostoyevsky draws attention in the novel to the precarious nature of all dreams and fears in relation to some ultimate, inapprehensible reality. Ippolit, for example, is shown to be in a state of abnormally heightened consciousness due to his illness (see p399-400), while Myshkin, too, it is suggested, is a man of excessive imagination, (p30) capable of working himself up into a frame of mind where he loses touch with what is going on around him. A degree of complicity with the power of illusion is suggested in the prince's behaviour in the Epanchin's drawing room, for example, where, with increasing excitement and in "a state of emotional rapture for no apparent reason and, it seemed, out of all proportion to the subject of the conversation", (p546) the prince begins to expound his ideal of paradise on earth — the ideological counterpart in the novel to Ippolit's nightmare of terror. The desperate happiness characteristic of Myshkin's state of mind on this occasion presages the onset of an epileptic fit so that a connection is established between the vision of



"harmonious joy" and abnormal perception. The boundaries between sickness and health, blindness and insight, light and darkness, are shown to be infinitely changeable and deceitful.

The power of illusion to disturb and inspire is thus of major importance in the novel. But which is the shadow to the truer reality? Myshkin's dream? Or Ippolit's nightmare? Is redemption only an illusion in a world where death retains its sting? Or, alternatively, are suffering and the dreary perversities of the mind the "twilight of nothingness" that will finally fade with the dawning of the "beauty" that will save the world? (p394) By stressing the constant interplay of insight and illusion in *The Idiot* Dostoyevsky partially lightens the effects of his malediction. In the meantime, the novel seem to imply, there is tragedy. But tomorrow all may change, the patterns of light and dark may shift and undo themselves in the twinkling of an eye — the time it takes to pass from sleep to wakefulness.

The fact that both Myshkin and Rogozhin are present in the final scene conveys something of this ongoing ambiguity despite the unequal impact of alternative dream-worlds in the novel. Rogozhin is reduced to a state of semi-idiotcy after the murder of Nastasya and Myshkin is also incoherent. But Myshkin's gesture of compassion towards Rogozhin at this moment is consistent with the moral integrity that has characterized his behaviour throughout the novel. Light, it would seem, is not completely extinguished by darkness even though it fails to overcome it. The scene thus extends the play on the idea of scales only in a more hopeful direction than suggested by the apocalyptic picture of weights and measures, falseness and hypocrisy, developed elsewhere in the novel. For on the one hand, there is the overwhelming evidence of human despair and failure. On the other, there is the weight of one frail, foolish man and his dreams. Such precariousness has little of Bakhtin's optimism whereby change and renewal are as inevitable as the turning of the wheel, and incongruities collide in a vigorously positive relativity. The quality of uncertainty in *The Idiot* corresponds more closely to the mistrustful hopefulness of Beckett according to whom: "It is because there is not only darkness but also light that our situation becomes inexplicable".<sup>39</sup>

### *The Gambler*

#### III. i. "La volupté cherche à s'irriter par la douleur"

While anticipating some of the themes and characterization techniques developed in

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<sup>39</sup> Cited in 'Beckett by the Madeleine', p23.

*The Idiot* Dostoyevsky's *Gambler* concentrates on a more limited aspect of the phenomenon of suffering and proposes a different means of redeeming it. In *The Idiot* the problem of consciousness is also a spiritual and ethical one, the characters' potential as beings in process being defined in uneasy relation to both terrible forces of destruction and dreams of a paradise on earth. In *The Gambler* there are no comparable shades of metaphysical speculation cast on the characters' destiny, and their flaw of consciousness has more to do with the petty malice of wounded egotism. Furthermore, rather than being contrasted with an ideal of moral beauty, the addiction to pain in the 1866 novella is counterbalanced by the poetry of roulette. This gives the work a very different set of priorities to the one informing *The Idiot*. Elizabeth Dalton suggests, for example, that the fascination with "primordial" emotion in *The Idiot* places its artistic integrity under great strain. Form, in other words, is disproportionately subservient to the desire to engage with formlessness and chaos. Thus, "In the compulsion to lean out over the abyss [...] the novel also risks its own existence as an aesthetic object".<sup>40</sup> *The Gambler* could be said to reverse this pattern. Its hero, Alexis, is no apocalyptic dreamer or saint broken by compassion, but rather, "a poet in his own way",<sup>41</sup> possessed by his love for a game of chance. With its artificial coherence and power to absorb all his creative energies the game of roulette displaces the metaphysical solution to the problem of tragedy with an aesthetic one, while giving a formal symmetry to narrative tensions (Alexis is poised to return to the tables in the final pages so that everything is set to start over again). In this respect, *The Gambler* anticipates the response of New Novelist Robbe-Grillet to tragedy, and which concerns the "goddess of illusion": namely, absorption in a private world of signs which imposes its own order on the "desreglement de pensées" associated with the flaw of consciousness.

A perverse cultivation of suffering for its own sake is discernable in some of the characters in *The Idiot* as well as in their implied author who sometimes lingers over morbid images in a manner out of proportion to their representational or aesthetic purpose. In *The Gambler* this addiction is much more apparent since it is unaccompanied by the metaphysical questions and psychological complexity which makes characters in the later novel particularly difficult to analyze. The love of cruelty apparent in Alexis and Polina's relationship is only sketchily modified by metaphysical or ethical considerations. Despite its reflection of a certain kind of egotism, then, *The Gambler* seems to mirror the "volupté" of suffering described by Montaigne more closely than *The Idiot*. In his essay, 'Que nostre desir s'accroît par la malaisance', Montaigne analyzes the love of suffering outside a definite ethical framework, relating it to the human need for

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<sup>40</sup> *Unconscious Structure in 'The Idiot'*, p141.

<sup>41</sup> Dostoyevsky, cited in Jessie Coulson's introduction to the novel, p11.

nervous stimulus deriving from the challenge of the difficult and the painful. Thus, in a love affair:

La difficulté des assignations, le danger des surprises, la honte du lendemain, [...] c'est ce qui donne pointe à la sauce [...] La volupté mesme cherche à s'irriter par la douleur.<sup>42</sup>

By ascribing the ability to derive enjoyment from adversity not to the sick, but to the seekers after adventure and intensity of experience, Montaigne in fact foreshadows aspects of Nietzsche's (more strongly anti-ethical) analysis of tragedy which, as I will shortly consider, is of some relevance to *The Gambler*.<sup>43</sup>

Certainly the moral sensitivity of the main character in the novella is secondary to his addiction to nervous excitement. Alexis shows both sadistic and masochistic impulses in his relations with Polina and derives as much enjoyment from inflicting pain as from submitting to it. This constant imbalance in the relationship is not a propitious foundation for love between two equal subjects who are capable of mutual recognition and affirmation. For in the vicious circle of sado-masochism the other can only ever be an accessory in a solitary theatre of sensationalism in which pain is an end in itself. In his lust for power over Polina, or for acquiescence in her power over him, Alexis loses his own "form" also, forfeiting all sense of self and of proportion in his abandonment to this intoxication of the nerves:

'Well, yes, yes, I do enjoy being enslaved by you. There is, there really is enjoyment in the utmost degree of humility and insignificance [...] when I talk to you I want to say everything, everything, everything. I lose all my form [...] Take advantage of my slavery, profit by it, make use of it! Do you know, one day I shall kill you! [...] I'll simply kill you just like that, because sometimes I long to devour you [...] pleasure is always some use, and savage, boundless power, even though it's only over a fly, is after all a pleasure in its way. Man is a despot by nature and likes inflicting pain. You enjoy it terribly'. (pp46, 47, 48, 49)

Alexis appears in such passages to be little more than a manic voluptuary while Mikhailovsky's criticism of his author because of his predilection for representing this sort of character, and for dwelling on it, is shown to be not without point. As

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<sup>42</sup> 'Apologie de Raimond Sebond', *Essais, Livre II*, pp276-277.

<sup>43</sup> Because of the emphasis on nervous stimulus in *The Gambler* I find Alex de Jonge's definition of the phenomenon of intensity (*The Age of Intensity*) extremely helpful to an understanding of the work. Joseph Frank is critical of de Jonge's reading of Dostoyevsky for failing to give due consideration to the ethical dimension of Dostoyevsky's œuvre (*Through the Russian Prism*). However, not only are ethical questions developed less fully in *The Gambler* (although Grandmamma and Mr Astley act as something of a moral gauge in the story), but also, taken in conjunction with *The Idiot*, the work shows how wide is the range of Dostoyevsky's ideas on the subject and how complicated, therefore, is the task of identifying his allegiances.

Mikhailovsky explains:

the distinctive trait of our cruel talent will be the needlessness of the suffering he causes, its lack of motivation and its pointlessness [...] a temptation to tormentingly tickle the reader's nerves or subject any of the characters to cruel influence.<sup>44</sup>

This taste for gratuitous pain, however, has a significant role to play as an alternative response to tragedy. For the fear that is courted, the hazard that is deliberately sought after, has lost some of its power to dismay as a result of being voluntarily entertained. It becomes instead a medium for exercising power and for exploring the individual's capacity to experience different sensations. By identifying the craving for excess with the more vital personalities in the story Dostoyevsky is, in fact, championing a characteristic Nietzschean trait whereby the love of suffering is a sign, not of weakness, but of strength, and of a zestful appreciation of life in all its facets. The "predilection for the hard, gruesome, evil, problematic aspect of existence", writes Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, is prompted not by decline but by "well-being, by overflowing health, by the fullness of existence".<sup>45</sup> A Nietzschean appetite for the extremes of experience is certainly apparent in Alexis who sees himself defying all limits and then collapsing at last from exhaustion:

[...] even without any promptings of vanity I really was suddenly overcome by a terrible craving for risk. Perhaps the soul passing through such a wide range of sensations is not satisfied but only exacerbated by them, and demands more and more of them, growing more and more powerful until it finally reaches exhaustion. (p32)

Other characters similarly combine cruelty with an extravagant generosity of spirit. Polina, for example, is both passionate and vicious, while Grandmamma, noticeably stimulated by the discomfort of others, is also high-spirited and generous with her winnings at the roulette tables, including some unknown vagrant in the distribution of her largesse.

This is a very different reading of tragedy to the one explored in *The Idiot* through the character of Myshkin. The metaphysical comfort Myshkin represents is rendered

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<sup>44</sup> *A Cruel Talent. An Essay on Dostoevsky*, p29.

<sup>45</sup> *The Birth of Tragedy*, p17. The first edition of this work was published in 1872. Miller questions the possibility of direct influence between Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky in 'Nietzsche's "discovery" of Dostoevsky', p211. Most critics seem to discuss the two writers in terms of a philosophy of nihilism (similarities and differences) rather than in terms of similarity of mood, or a common fascination for the power of illusion, which I explore here.

superfluous once pain has been transformed into one of life's pleasures. The "Dionysian" character thus eludes the anguish of tragedy by no longer seeking to be released from it. The result is an upside-down justification of the "hard, gruesome, evil, problematic" aspects of existence, as Nietzsche phrases it, besides which the perversity of Robbe-Grillet's metaphysical tragedian appears mere academic quibbling.

It is the nastier aspects of some of Dostoyevsky's characters which makes the application of Bakhtin's carnival theory to the question of tragedy highly problematic. Despite the readiness to embrace expressions of "worldly evil", "baseness and vulgarity" in Bakhtin's conception of menippean satire, a hypothetical forerunner to Dostoyevskyeian carnival, Bakhtin offers only a limited account of this unattractive psychology — noticeable in Dostoyevsky's characters and, implicitly, to some measure, in Dostoyevsky himself. Mikhailovsky, therefore, may have omitted to mention the process of ethical assessment that usually qualifies this phenomenon in Dostoyevsky, but Bakhtin, it seems to me, fails to acknowledge its gravity. Nor, of course, does Nietzsche, in so far as "gravity" implies the very moral element Nietzsche, like Robbe-Grillet, is attempting to discredit in his own account of the anatomy of tragedy. But Nietzsche at least does not attempt to disguise the destructive potential of the psychology of cruelty, even though he glamourizes it, and this is why the idea of "Dionysian" excess is, to my mind, a more appropriate metaphor for the love of suffering in some of Dostoyevsky's characters than the Bakhtinian one of carnival. The gleeful energies in Alexis, Polina and Grandmamma correspond to the exuberance that typifies the archetypal carnival funfair, but their belligerent egotism is very far from reflecting carnival's celebratory attitude or its "jolly relativity". Bakhtin concludes that the "somber colors of Dostoevsky's works should not confuse us: they are not the final word",<sup>46</sup> but it seems, on the contrary, that there is a great deal of painful ambivalence associated with the perversities of Dostoyevsky's characters, and that the "somber colors" in *The Gambler*, as in *The Idiot*, do not come with the assurance of a "happy" outcome. Bakhtin's polyphony, therefore, is a helpful theoretical model for the phenomenon of uncertainty in Dostoyevsky but his reading of that uncertainty in terms of carnival makes assumptions that Dostoyevsky's novels do not always support.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p139.

<sup>47</sup> It is also intriguing that the medieval carnival, which provides one of the historical models for carnival theory, had a cruel and even terrifying side to it, as seen in the "carnavalesque" practice of tarring and feathering, which would hardly have been a source of unsullied enjoyment for any of the parties involved. In my view Bakhtin underplays this crueller side of the carnival psyche.

Moreover, if carnival insufficiently accounts for the malice of some of Dostoyevsky's characters it also soft-pedals their mean-spiritedness and the egotism that is totally opposed to carnival's unitarian ideals. Alexis's showy misdemeanours in the story are frequently motivated by spite and a childish wilful attitude to law and order. His staged confrontation with officialdom at the Roman Embassy, for example, and his threat to spit "in Monsignore's coffee", are motivated by his imagined humiliation after having been forced to wait for an audience while others are allowed to pass before him. The fact that he has read, while waiting, an article which makes "a dreadful attack on Russia" (pp22-23) adds to his growing sense of resentment. Similarly, it is not the carefree self-abandonment of the carnival reveller that goads Alexis into schoolboyish pranks in Roulettenburg so much as the contemptuous treatment he receives at de Griex's hands, and, worse still, at Polina's. As Alexis sets out to insult the Baroness and scandalize the Baron, (p51) he is hoping to prove his daring to Polina, and force her into demeaning herself, in turn, by begging him to stop what she has instigated as a test of his devotion:

I've begun to want to have the laugh on the lot of them, and come out as the dashing hero. Let them watch me! Never fear, [Polina] will take fright at the scandal and call me back to her. And even if she doesn't, she will see that I'm not a milksop [...]. (p58)

Such pettiness and spite reveals not extravagance but a meanness of spirit for which there is no equivalent in Bakhtin nor, ultimately, in Nietzsche. Dostoyevsky's perception of some of the more unattractive wounds that afflict the human spirit, eliciting both pity and distaste, excludes either an easy philosophic optimism, or the somewhat romantic spirit of rebellion that underlies some of Nietzsche's inspired rhetoric. Ironically, however, it is partly his exposure of the pettiness underlying his characters' actions that absolves Dostoyevsky from accusations of an unthinking glorification of their perversity. Alexis's momentary consciousness of the "whole loathsomeness" of his situation is a reminder that his author, too, is fully aware of the cost of giving in to such compulsions. But *The Gambler* does not incline too far in this distinctly ethical direction. There are hints of self-awareness in the characters, and of judgement on the part of their implied author, but the most significant response to the wayward psychology of the characters in the novella lies elsewhere.

### III. ii. Redemption through the "goddess of illusion"<sup>48</sup>

On one level Alexis's obsession with roulette is simply another manifestation of his

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<sup>48</sup> Nietzsche's term. See also footnote p190.

nervous excitability. Accordingly, Alex de Jonge sees roulette as a continuation of the pursuit of sensationalism in Dostoyevsky's narrative, in that it "[offers] an unlimited and essentially meaningless excitement".<sup>49</sup> It is true that the same intensity of mood characteristic of Alexis's relationship with Polina is discernable in his attitude to the game, and that the two are actually linked in his mind, largely because he first plays, and wins, on Polina's behalf, leading him to dub her his Lady Luck. Yet a distinction is made between the nervous excitability that typifies Alexis's general mood and the particular fascination he feels for the game of roulette. This brings me back to Nietzsche and the distinction he makes between "intoxication" and "dreams", the first concerning primitive Dionysian energies and the second what he terms the "Apollonian" impulse towards order and rationality — in which Nietzsche includes the contemplation of formal patterns in the world of "beautiful illusion", namely, art.<sup>50</sup> The aesthetic impulse enters significantly into Alexis's enjoyment of the game of roulette. A delight in formal order is reflected in his mania for detecting patterns, for example, which make sense of what he knows to be a random series of throws:

I am beginning to remember also that the middle twelve numbers, to which I had become positively addicted, turned up most frequently of all. There was a sort of pattern — they appeared three or four times running, without fail, then disappeared for two turns, then again appeared three or four times in succession. (p130)

The roulette tables thus come to represent a special imaginative space in which Alexis may exercise his skill in prediction and analysis. Dostoyevsky himself draws attention to the artistry involved in Alexis's methods (what Nietzsche would term his "ardent longing for illusion"), when he refers to his character not as a "mere gambler" but as "a poet".<sup>51</sup> When Alexis's emotions are stirred and his imagination transfixed by an idea he has about roulette, the combined effect is of an inexorable personal destiny laying hold of his mind. On receiving a visit from Polina in his rooms in Chapter 14, for example, he is suddenly convinced that if he plays once more on her behalf he will win back everything. It seems fated. Yet the sense of fate that now masters him is almost entirely conjured up by his own exalted imagination, by "some combination of presentiments, some extraordinary exertion of will-power, some self-intoxication of the imagination". (p128)

The hallucinatory power of a "self-intoxicated" imagination is, I have suggested, of some importance to an understanding of *The Idiot*. The dreams of Myshkin and Ippolit are shown in the novel to be partly generated by their heightened state of mental excitement.

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<sup>49</sup> *The Age of Intensity*, p113.

<sup>50</sup> *The Birth of Tragedy*, p39.

<sup>51</sup> Dostoyevsky, cited in Jessie Coulson's introduction to *The Gambler*, p11.

At the same time Myshkin's visions, like Ippolit's nightmares, are grounded in powerful desires and fears beyond his rational control, and consequently threaten to overwhelm both the formal order of the dream and the sanity of the dreamer. As such, dreams in *The Idiot* are a potential source of disturbance which have a divisive, rather than a cathartic, effect on the personalities of the characters. Alexis's fascination with roulette, on the other hand, has a unifying influence on his personality giving him a focus for his energies, while successfully screening out his painful awareness of other people and his own sense of inadequacy in relation to them. Thus where Myshkin's dreamy abstraction is constantly shaken by a compassionate awareness of others, Alexis's absorption in the poetry of roulette constitutes an impenetrable defence against such intrusions. When he wins huge sums of money for Polina, he forgets her in the process of stacking and counting the two-hundred thousand francs. And as he returns to the tables, the calculations in which he engages and the thrill of picking out patterns in the arbitrary sequences, dim his awareness of her even further. Thus his love for Polina, the one vital if perverse link with a world outside his own mind and imagination, "seemed to have retreated into the background". (p140) It stays in the background for the remainder of the story as Alexis withdraws increasingly into a fascinating but private world of signs and numbers with its own inner coherence.

Nietzsche judges that to sustain the coherence of any aesthetic illusion, exclusion of the other, both of metaphysics and of ethics, is of fundamental importance. Thus: "to be at all able to dream with this inner joy in contemplation [the dreamer-artist] must have completely lost sight of the waking reality and its ominous obtrusiveness".<sup>52</sup> In this respect the game of roulette in Dostoyevsky's story offers a possible analogy for the game of writing represented by the narrative itself. For the formal priorities of art similarly impose an aesthetic rather than an ethical order on contradictions. Accordingly, the emphasis is less on preconceived contradictions than on the achievement of coherence in an invented world, and hence on the generating and resolving of tensions on the 'purely' formal level. The sense of control, of "victory and power", which Alexis experiences after his enormous win at the tables, may be compared to the sense of mastery over adversity won by the artist as a result of his organizational and expressive powers.

Dostoyevsky's narrative also intimates that one of the consequences of a perfectly enclosed, self-absorbed imaginative world is condemnation to a dreary eternity of repetition, and eternity, as Jean-Paul Sartre has shown, can be hellish. Alexis himself admits, "I have simply destroyed myself". (p153) But it equally hints at a more "carnavalesque" optimism, and so, at the possibility for renewal contained in the refusal

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<sup>52</sup> *The Birth of Tragedy*, p45.



of final definitions. Alexis therefore considers that he can "change the whole course of [his] destiny in an hour!" (p161)<sup>53</sup> With its focus on the absorbing activity of a game and the forgetfulness that derives from it *The Gambler* could be said to presage the "terrain de jeu" proposed by Robbe-Grillet as the novelist's principle means of denouncing tragedy. It also anticipates the circular structure of many of Robbe-Grillet's novels, including his 1953 work, *Les gomme*s.

#### *Les gomme*s

#### IV. i. Rewriting 'Œdipus'

Dostoyevsky's world is one of fearful shadows and premonitions, dreams and longings. It is also a world where the characters are granted the illusion of 'life' if of a very particular and circumscribed sort. Minds, nerves and emotions function at painfully intense levels as the characters wrestle with their being-in-the-world. The transition from Dostoyevsky to Robbe-Grillet in this respect is disconcertingly abrupt. The high-pitched emotionalism is displaced by narratives whose undercurrents of feeling are muted and denaturalized. Yet a sense of beleaguered humanity persists in *Les gomme*s and *Dans le labyrinthe*, which for this reason may be described as modern tragedies represented in non-tragic terms.

"L'aventure de Wallas dans *Les gomme*s est une version moderne de la tragédie d'Œdipe".<sup>54</sup> Thus begins Morrisette's case for the Œdipus myth as interpretative key to *Les gomme*s, a work which otherwise, Morrisette implies, borders on the "incompréhensible".<sup>55</sup> As references to the Œdipus myth have acquired an almost banal self-evidence since Samuel Beckett first drew attention to them it suffices to mention only the more obvious of the Œdipus clues to demonstrate the plausibility of Morrisette's thesis.<sup>56</sup> Firstly, the setting of the Greek drama appears to have been deliberately evoked in references to the "rue de Corinthe", the "route de Delph", and the "ruines de Thèbes". The action of the original is reproduced in codified form in references to Wallas's troubled childhood memories of the town (involving his mother), in the police

<sup>53</sup> It is not clear whether the change will come about as a result of his abandoning the game or as a result of his staking his last gulden again and becoming a winner.

<sup>54</sup> *Les romans de Robbe-Grillet*, p53.

<sup>55</sup> cf Ben Stolztfus's early comment on the novel in *Alain Robbe-Grillet and the New French Novel* where he argues that without the Œdipus conundrum "the novel has no cohesion — it lacks a center". (p71) Ilona Leki repeats this observation in her 1983 work but qualifies it with reference to Robbe-Grillet's aesthetic priorities (*Alain Robbe-Grillet*, pp15 and 24).

<sup>56</sup> See Morrisette's account of the history of the Œdipus clues in a footnote on p53 of *Les romans de Robbe-Grillet*.

theory that Dupont's son may also be his killer, in Wallas's fascination with the sensual Mediterranean-looking woman in the stationery shop he suspects of being Dupont's estranged wife. The notion of a riddle to which the hero alone holds the answer is inscribed in details such as the four missing letters on the eraser Wallas buys which could, together with the "deux lettres centrales 'di'", spell the name of "Œdipe"; and in the Sphinx-like riddles addressed to him by the inebriated tramp. Lastly, the sense of fate that pursues Wallas as he blunders his way through an investigation in which he himself supplies the object of inquiry, suggests a connection with the Greek hero damned by the gods to blindness and murder.

Having identified these references, which are undeniably and even overwhelmingly present once the reader starts looking for them, it does not follow that the reader then possesses the clue to the novel's essential meaning, if it has one. It is significant in this respect that, after linking the Œdipus myth to the "unité véritable du roman",<sup>57</sup> Morrisette goes on to conclude that, after all, *Les gommes* has "une structure trop diversifiée, où l'unité de conception semble parfois sur le point de se perdre tout à fait".<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, it seems obvious that the Œdipus fragments, whatever their importance, do not have the same resonance in Robbe-Grillet as they do in the Greek myth. There is no hint in *Les gommes*, for example, of the searing remorse experienced by Jocaste and Œdipus, nor of the latter's redemption through suffering: a scheme which accords only too neatly with Robbe-Grillet's analysis and dismissal of tragedy in his essay.

For this reason, Roudiez's interpretation of the Œdipus myth in *Les gommes* seems more appropriate than Morrisette's since it accounts for the superabundance of mythological clues (whose paradoxical effect is to undermine their own credibility),<sup>59</sup> while accommodating the anti-tragic, anti-humanist bias of the author. To quote Morrisette's paraphrase of this view:

Tout le roman des *Gommes* serait donc en quelque sorte une démonstration de l'inutilité, sinon de l'impossibilité, pour l'homme contemporain, de se nourrir d'archétypes ou de mythes hérités du passé, et la gomme que cherche Wallas deviendrait un instrument symbolique destiné à effacer la continuité avec le passé humaniste.<sup>60</sup>

The reader of *Les gommes* is thus confronted by at least two critical options with regard to

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<sup>57</sup> p53.

<sup>58</sup> p73.

<sup>59</sup> See Olga Bernal's comment to this effect in *Alain Robbe-Grillet. Le roman de l'absence*: "Aucun lecteur n'a besoin de tant de signes pour comprendre qu'on veut lui parler d'Œdipe". (p62) The fact that readers did not immediately identify the Œdipus references (see Morrisette's footnote p53) would seem to contradict this view, however.

<sup>60</sup> *Les romans de Robbe-Grillet*, p67.

the Œdipus theme. *Les gomme*s, says Morrisette, is a new version of an old tragedy without which it is rendered unintelligible. *Les gomme*s, insists Roudiez, is not a tragedy but a dramatization of unintelligibility against which humanist myths are no defence.

It could be argued, however, that both critics are justified in their assessment of the novel in the light of a third interpretation of the Œdipus theme: namely, as dramatization of the insecurities generated by unintelligibility that is one of the grounds of modern tragedy. The incomprehensibility Morrisette sees as a threat to the text's coherence once the framework of the Œdipus myth is dismantled thus constitutes the real 'tragic' dimension of the novel.

#### IV. ii. Unintelligibility and 'tragic' malaise

The experience of uncertainty is endemic to the narrative of *Les gomme*s, to the point where the very desire to comprehend seems sapped by a radical unknowing, by the "scepticisme stérilisant de maniac" associated with Fabius, head of the "Bureau des Enquêtes" and Wallas's boss. In fact, the whole plot is constructed on an illusion. The object of Wallas's investigation (Dupont's corpse), is yet to be 'invented' so that the possibility of gaining in knowledge is frustrated by a singular lack of information. Where the traditional detective (and *Les gomme*s is as much a commentary on the *roman policier* as it is on the Œdipus myth) progresses from a state of ignorance to one of superior understanding, characters in *Les gomme*s get nowhere in either physical or investigative senses. As the narrative humorously observes: "Une fois seuls, Wallas et Laurent font le bilan de ce qu'ils viennent d'apprendre. Le bilan est vite fait car ils n'ont rien appris du tout". (p197)

This noticeable lack of progress in the acquisition of knowledge is neatly imitated in the perambulations of Wallas, who has no idea where he is going and so cannot ask for useful directions ("il ne sait pas comment poser sa question: il n'a pas pour l'instant de but précis"). (p54) He is consequently left to walk round and round in circles in a city whose main street is the "Boulevard Circulaire" ("Il est descendu au même arrêt et maintenant, il suit le Boulevard Circulaire qui le ramène au petit pavillon de brique et à la chambre misérable du Café des Alliés [...] Wallas n'est pas plus avancé que lorsqu'il est arrivé hier, par ce même chemin"). (p229) An impression of peripheral movement around an empty center is thus created, effectively anticipating the ending to the novel, where, instead of the detective apprehending the criminal, the detective becomes the criminal, creating the very problem he was trying to solve. All Wallas's preceding activity is seen to have been based on an illusion, and so, on a fundamental lack of understanding which

makes Morrisette's interpretation of him as an Œdipus figure "qui [sait] trouver le mot des énigmes, la solution des questions obscures" richly ironic.<sup>61</sup>

What of the hero's response to this elaborate meaninglessness in which he is caught up? For to wholly escape tragedy the frustration of significance in the novel must be dissociated from any sense of emotional disharmony. If it is unsettling for readers, it must at least be accepted with equanimity by the characters in so far as they can be said to reflect the norms of Robbe-Grillet's imaginative world. Emotional equilibrium, implies Robbe-Grillet in 'Nature, humanisme, tragédie', is what distinguishes the enlightened anti-humanist from the (humanist) tragedian and provides the necessary ballast for the soundness of the former's reasoning: "Et cette absence de signification, l'homme aujourd'hui [...] ne l'éprouve plus comme un manque, ni comme un déchirement. Devant un tel vide, il ne ressent désormais nul vertige".<sup>62</sup>

The distinction made in the essay is by no means so clear-cut in the novel, however. The dismantling of the Œdipus myth and its reduction to odd fragments throughout the text is accompanied by a malaise that lingers incongruously in the absence of a metaphysical justification. Wallas is not simply bothered but, "tourmenté", by feelings of incompetence and insecurity. His communication skills are inadequate, and while this leads to some comic situations from the reader's point of view (his interview with Mme Smite, for example), from Wallas's perspective these mêlées are highly discomforting. Having solicited, on one occasion, an interview with the alleged Mme Dupont Wallas is assailed by "le sentiment désagréable qu'il est en train de perdre son temps". He then attempts to extricate himself from the interview and is disconcerted when some chance remark of his provokes a fruity laugh from the woman, prompting him to go anxiously over what he has just said: "Dans le doute, Wallas essaie de la reconstituer; mais il ne parvient pas: 'Il va falloir que je... Il va falloir...' [...] Je regrette, Madame, d'être obligé de... Une minute, s'il vous plaît, il faut que j'aïlle... Il va falloir que j'aïlle... Il va falloir... Il va falloir...".(p185)

Such symptoms of near-psychotic anxiety are frequent in the narrative and Wallas's continued attempts to overcome them with purposeful walking ("il marche et il enroule au fur et à mesure la ligne ininterrompue de son propre passage, non pas une succession d'images déraisonnables et sans rapport entre elles, mais un ruban uni où chaque élément se place aussitôt dans la trame [...]"), (p52) and with reassurances about his importance and place in the world ("sa présence en ces lieux est nécessaire"), (p71) testify to the

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<sup>61</sup> *Les romans de Robbe-Grillet*, p54.

<sup>62</sup> *Pour un nouveau roman*, p53.

limits of his success. The fact that he so desperately seeks confidence and control indicates an inability to come to terms with the "absence de signification" that characterizes his world, so that an element of tragedy is reintroduced into the novel. However it must be emphasized that it is Wallas's response to an absence of intelligibility that makes *Les gomme*s potentially tragic, and not the phenomenon of unintelligibility itself.

Wallas's predicament illustrates that the problem of tragic experience — of alienation anguish and loss — is not directly dependent on a given philosophical framework or related to a specific object. Although some of the character's discomfort can be explained with reference to professional anxieties — the need to prove himself on a mission that is turning out to be highly confusing — or to the sense of dislocation experienced by a man in a strange town, much of his insecurity is dissociated from identifiable anxieties. It seems to indicate some 'flaw' in perception which, however unreasonable, produces noticeable symptoms of distress. Thus, after Montaigne, "Nous tressuons, nous tremblons, nous pallissons et rougissons aux secousses de nos imaginations". There are no violent changes of colour to betray Wallas's uneasiness to the reader (Dostoyevsky's characters change from red to white, to yellow and even green in their agitation) but his 'progress' around the Boulevard Circulaire is impeded by vertigo and a nagging "malaise cotonneux". The non-specific nature of this malaise makes it all the more insidious as it imposes itself as a condition of his being-in-the-world, unjustifiable, inexplicable and, in this sense, unresolvable.

#### IV. iii. "Deux millimètres carrés de rêve"

Does this mean that the void at the heart of the narrative reverberates with appeals for a metaphysics of presence? To assume this would be to perform the same leap in logic as Robbe-Grillet in the essay on tragedy where he links the desire for coherence and truth to a conviction about the prior existence of these things. Nowhere in *Les gomme*s is the chaos that confronts Wallas represented as an aberration from a norm: it is simply *there*, a condition of his world that must be reckoned with. That Wallas finds it difficult to accept the gap between his desire for meaning and the illogicality of events is also undeniable, and this creates 'tragic' tensions in the novel. But the same discontinuity which gives the novel its 'tragic' dimension holds the key to its optimism. For it is the absence of an authoritative truth in *Les gomme*s which promotes imaginative effort as well as insecurity, and imaginative effort is related to the aesthetic impulse which holds the beginnings of Robbe-Grillet's 'answer' to tragedy.

It is significant that the ability to invent in Robbe-Grillet's characters is related to their major vulnerability. The "flottement" of human intentions and dreams in the novel is what introduces tiny errors into the "ordonnance idéale" and leads to its undoing. Throughout the narrative, a series of well-laid plans are foiled by ill-regulated speculations in the minds of the characters which cause them to deviate from their pre-arranged agenda. However slight the deviation, the smallest of flaws is sufficient to mar perfection. Garinati, the would-be assassin, thus disables the elaborate machinery of assassination by adding a single move of his own to Bona's instructions: he fails to turn out the light. As a result, Dupont, forewarned, escapes. Marchat, succumbing to paranoid fears, loses his nerve at the last moment so that Dupont has to return to the house himself to collect his papers. Here, Wallas, busy pursuing his own misguided train of thought, awaits him, and, mistaking him for the assassin, shoots him.

If misguided intentions introduce an element of chaos into the narrative it is a chaos that is also an expression of freedom in the face of the tyranny of the predictable. The vagaries of human fancy that disrupt the "ordonnance idéale" provide a necessary escape-route from the legalism that order represents. In the little town that is the scene of Wallas's peregrinations, the sea is a symbol of this escape, its intrusion into the monotonous township by way of canals representing the way dreams of the imagination insinuate themselves into the banal and depressingly regular pattern of everyday affairs:

Pourtant cette ville triste n'est pas ennuyeuse: un réseau compliqué de canaux et de bassins y ramène de la mer, [...] l'odeur du varech, les mouettes et même quelques bateaux de faible tonnage [...] Cette eau, ce mouvement aèrent les esprits. Les sirènes des cargos leur arrivent du port [...] et leur apportent à l'heure de la marée l'espace, la tentation, la consolation du possible. (p19)

That this margin of liberty often results in a miscarriage of individual projects does not alter the fact that imaginative activity is the characters' principle means of asserting themselves in a bewildering universe. A number of characters in *Les gommes* make a contribution to the final dénouement of the novel through their imaginative involvement, which suggests a degree of control over individual destiny in Robbe-Grillet's world, or at least, a willing collusion with, rather than a passive submission to, fate. Dr Juard, Marchat and Dupont are all co-operating in a scheme that has been masterminded by Roy-Dauzet, (p31) and Laurent, puzzled by the case from his angle, wonders whether the "imagination funambalesque" of Roy-Dauzet is behind all the confusion; (p71) Bona has invented meticulous instructions for Garinati to follow, (p60) and refers to his elaboration

of the assassination plan as his special “œuvre”; (p102) Wallas is following written instructions from the fanciful Fabius while he himself clearly has too much imagination for the ideal private investigator, as indicated in the missing centimetre in his head measurements — at once a lack and a special capacity, a “manque dérisoire” and “Deux millimètres carrés de rêves”. (p260) Mme Bax, who also has “un peu trop d'imagination” to be a reliable witness, turns inventive narrator in her interview with Wallas, (pp113-114) while Mme Jean, Mlle Dexter and Mlle Lebermann all invent ‘information’ at the unwitting prompting of the police, (pp194-196). On several occasions throughout the narrative the reader, too, is jolted out of studious contemplation of what has apparently happened, to the realization that she has been witnessing the mental acting out of an hypothesis in a character’s mind (Laurent’s, for example). (p143)

The considerable value Robbe-Grillet attaches to the imagination leads this reader to the conclusion that the real criminal in the novel is Dupont. For he is the one character who is deficient in this respect, displaying a noticeable “manque de fantaisie” in his affairs, and having the deplorable habit “de n'agir jamais sans réfléchir, de ne jamais changer d'avis, de ne jamais se tromper”. (p182) It is only poetic justice, therefore, that he should be executed by the novel’s *deus ex machina*.

#### IV. iv. Imagination and invention: some distinctions

The poetic justice executed at the end of *Les gommes* is the most definitive expression of the overarching purposes of the novelist, to whose control everything in the narrative is subject. The fate of Wallas and Dupont in *Les gommes* clearly has an artistic symmetry that is contrasted with the psychological insecurity of the preceding pages. The juxtaposition of these two aspects of the narrative — aesthetic symmetry and the “desreglement de pensées” from which Wallas suffers — both of which are apparently generated by the power of the imagination, indicates the need for a distinction between different aspects of the creative faculty. For the images, sensations and fears that arise unprompted and throw the characters off-balance are qualitatively different from the formal patterning of image and sequence imposed on chaos throughout by the novelist. In the first instance, the characters are vulnerable to their own incalculability, while in the second, control is implicit, and the involuntary imaginings are transformed into conscious invention.<sup>63</sup> Like the game of roulette in *The Gambler* the concern with formal

<sup>63</sup> Note that Robbe-Grillet does not make an explicit distinction between imagination and invention in this manner in the essays (see, for example, *Pour un nouveau roman*, p30). A distinction is implicit, however, in the reference in *Angélique* to “le réel”, namely, that subconscious world of dreams that generates the profusion of image and feeling that then becomes the material of the narrative. See my Chapter 2 for

perfection apparent in the ending to *Les gomme*s proclaims the power of the controlled, waking illusion as a defence against the unsolicited imaginings so disturbing to the balance of the mind. Nietzsche's insistence on the importance of the Apollonian influence in art provides an illuminating evocation of the role played by rationality and formal restraint in Robbe-Grillet's surreal playground:

But we must also include in our image of Apollo that delicate boundary which the dream image must not overstep lest it have a pathological effect [...] We must keep in mind that measured restraint, that freedom from the wilder emotions, that calm of the sculptor god. His eye must be 'sunlike', as befits his origin; even when it is angry and distempered it is still hallowed by beautiful illusion.<sup>64</sup>

The troubled "desreglement de pensées" in *Les gomme*s is thus accompanied by pointed reminders of the power of illusion, not only in the production of distortions, but also in their control through the imposition of aesthetic form. The hints of "pathological effect" are carefully restrained by the "calm of the sculptor god".<sup>65</sup>

If it is only at the close of the novel that the reader perceives this most forcefully then she can follow the movement of the narrative back to its beginning where, less susceptible to the confusions of Wallas, she is also more alert to the formal intricacies of the manner of their representation, to their "measured restraint", and even humour, once "hallowed by beautiful illusion". The theatrical language of the opening, for example, underlines the conscious artistry of the narrative to come, and gently mocks the grandiose drama pervading high tragedy. "Trois coups de torchons" by the bar's proprietor (p11) imitate the "trois coups" preceding the raising of the curtain, and the accompanying terminology ("personnage présent en scène"; "le décor"; "Quand tout est prêt la lumière s'allume") bespeaks the exaggerated and caricatured gestures of high drama. The figure three is picked up later in the narrative and repeated in a manner that seems suggestive, were it not for the ludicrous banality of the context: the three thin slices of ham on Dupont's dinner plate, (p23) and the three sandwiches in the workman's packed lunch. (p56) Like the language of the political poster these cabalistic signs seem to signify "beaucoup de choses, ou rien du tout", (p53) reminding us that we are reading a piece of Robbe-Grillet drama regulated by an order of its own, both arbitrary and deliberate, a product of chance and necessity.<sup>66</sup>

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comment on aspects of "le réel" in *Le miroir qui revient*.

<sup>64</sup> *The Birth of Tragedy*, p35.

<sup>65</sup> Although Nietzsche acquiesces to suffering more vigorously than Robbe-Grillet, who denies its fascination in the essay on tragedy, Nietzsche is closer to Robbe-Grillet than Dostoyevsky in his analysis of the power of illusion to control "pathological effects", and in the priority he then gives to illusion over metaphysical comfort as a defence against forces of destruction.

<sup>66</sup> cf Olga Bernal's comment on Wallas's actions in *Alain Robbe-Grillet: Le roman de*



For this reason, the dislocations and repetitions of the final pages which focus again on the “patron” may be seen to imitate the circular movement of the crime. The disjointed phraseology conceivably indicates what Morrisette refers to as the “patron’s” “paroxysme de l’anxiété” and “une sorte d’attaque de paranoïa”,<sup>67</sup> but it equally suggests the running together of reflections in the water of the aquarium in which the proprietor’s image is “noyée”, at the novel’s close as at its opening. Like the fantastic monsters lurking in the town’s canals the whole story, it would seem, has arisen from the troubled water of dreams, and given momentary coherence before it sinks back again into obscurity. This, after all, is neither high tragedy nor a criminal investigation but a “décor de rêves”.

Given, then, the patent affirmation of artifice in the narrative, perhaps the interpretation of the Œdipus myth which best reflects the author’s intentions is found, once more, in some comments made by Nietzsche in his *Birth of Tragedy*. For Nietzsche saw the Œdipus story as one of the most attractive and, implicitly, the most *artistic* in all Greek mythology because it was based on the idea of perversity, of acting against nature. Œdipus succeeds in answering the “riddle of nature”, Nietzsche tells us, because he himself resists her in wedding his mother.<sup>68</sup> The beguiling references to Œdipus in *Les gommes* may, after all, be potentially more ‘meaningful’ than even Morrisette allows in his article on this theme. It is at least permissible to see the final pages of *Les gommes*, which bring the Œdipus theme to its conclusion, as an indictment by the implied author, after the manner of Nietzsche, of the so-called “natural” wisdom of classical tragedy.

In the final analysis *Les gommes* both proves and disproves Robbe-Grillet’s theory about tragedy. At one of the Cérisy colloquiums he distinguished between art that avoids tragedy, and art that denounces it by exposing its artificial nature:

vous ne pouvez pas prétendre que je ne joue pour échapper au tragique puisque [...] le jeu dénonce ce tragique comme étant une création humaine, qu’une autre création humaine peut détruire.<sup>69</sup>

*Les gommes* shows that tragedy, or at least, the experience of tragedy, is not simply a “création humaine” or an “additional notion of evil” contrived by culture, but an involuntary disturbance of mind and feeling that can be neither avoided nor easily eliminated. Counterbalancing this, however, are the elaborately staged formal

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*l’absence*: “[...] si sa fonction de détective le conduit à un crime, ce sera non pas un acte-destin, mais bien plutôt un acte littéraire”. (p55)

<sup>67</sup> *Les romans de Robbe-Grillet*, p72.

<sup>68</sup> See *The Birth of Tragedy*, pp68-69.

<sup>69</sup> *Nouveau roman: hier, aujourd’hui I*, p97.

manœuvres which remind the reader that the world of conscious illusion can incorporate these terrors and denaturalize them so that they are, momentarily, deprived of their power.

### *Dans le Labyrinthe*

#### V. i. The "Olympus of appearance"

Robbe-Grillet's aim to frustrate tragic significance is more concerted in his 1959 novel where the ability to conceptualize and articulate is undermined by the narrative's pointed disinclination to accept anything as a valid starting point for hypothesis. Certainly the narrative seems empty of that clutter of misleading signs that enables characters in *Les gommes* (and readers of the novel) to construct interesting if inconclusive theories about Dupont's fate. Similarly, Wallas's difficulty with asking for directions in the earlier novel is reduced in *Dans le labyrinthe* to a more radical inarticulacy as the soldier is unable to even verbalize elementary questions: "Sais-tu où se trouve", he begins at one point, (p34) but leaves the question unformed because he does not know who, or what, he is looking for, only that he has a box which he must carry around until he finds someone to give it to. Looking vaguely about for street names, the soldier finds nothing, because the signs are not there, because they are too highly placed, or because he is too blinded by snow to read. And in any case: "un nom de rue ne lui fournirait guère de renseignement utilisable, dans cette ville qu'il ne connaît pas". (p31)

The soldier's dilemma is in many respects paralleled by the reader's. Whereas in previous Robbe-Grillet novels readers are encouraged to interpret an incomplete sequence of events, knowing that the text supports several interpretations without definitively sanctioning any of them, *Dans le labyrinthe* seems to mistrust our worthiness for such a venture. Circumventing forays into the metaphysical, Robbe-Grillet reminds the reader with particular insistence of the material properties of things and their complete insignificance except as motifs in his text. Anticipating, for example, the tragic associations of war and death which form part of the décor of the novel, Robbe-Grillet forewarns the reader that: "Il s'agit pourtant ici d'une réalité strictement matérielle c'est-à-dire qu'elle ne prétend à aucune valeur allégorique". It is as though readers are being instructed to read, but not to think or dream around, the text. Only a reader determined to ignore this commitment to material reality could detect allegorical significance in the object described in the opening pages, and whose physical form is said to resemble at once "une sorte de croix", "une fleur", "une figure vaguement humaine", and "un poignard". (p13) The proliferation seems to indicate a tolerance of multiple

perspectives but, in effect, it places a restrictive ceiling on all of them by presenting each with an indifference that underscores their complete inappropriateness. When the banal contents of the box are disclosed, therefore, at the end of the narrative, there is barely the effect of an anti-climax because the reader, at this stage, and in response to the text's own promptings, has stopped asking why. In fact, so carefully does the narrative avoid building up expectations it is in danger of losing its readers through inattention, or a Barthesian meandering away to some narrative of one's own.

Such strategies of frustration on the level of interpretation extend to the flattening of the novel's moral and emotional landscape through references to its artificiality. Despite the soldier's penetration of several buildings, and hence the implication of interiority, the city is presented as a one-dimensional theatrical backdrop, whose closed doors open onto empty space: "La platitude de tout ce décor ferait croire, d'ailleurs, qu'il n'y a rien derrière ces carreaux, derrière ces portes, derrière ces façades". (p24) It seems an appropriate setting, therefore, for the soldier who, at his first appearance, is indistinguishable from the lamp-post against which he leans. ("Contre la base conique du support en fonte [...] s'enroulent de maigres rameaux d'un lierre théorique, en relief [...] Un peu plus haut, une hanche, un bras, une épaule s'appuient contre le fût du réverbère.") (p16) His bodily fatigue, deduced from the set of his face and motion of his limbs, is never allowed to assume the proportions of despair, and his conversation with the child is stilted, as if carried out between two puppets or very bad actors ("L'enfant pourrait croire qu'il est seul dans la salle, qu'il joue seulement à faire la conversation avec quelqu'un qui n'existe pas, ou bien avec une poupée, un mannequin, qui ne saurait répondre.") (p30) This is a world of systematically regulated platitudes, discouraging to symbolic readings and surely a most barren terrain for tragedy.

It is the very stillness of the novel's surfaces, however, that contributes to its disturbing atmosphere. The mesmerizing tranquillity of the decor and uncommunicativeness of the characters creates an impression of stasis uncannily suggestive of death. A contrived snapshot of drinkers in a tavern, for example, who are "figés [...] au beau milieu de gestes auxquels cet arrêt arbitraire a enlevé tout naturel", metamorphoses into a bizarre memento mori: "[...] les traits se sont crispés, les membres raidis, le sourire est devenu rictus, l'élan a perdu son intention et son sens. Il ne subsiste plus, à leur place, que la démesure, et l'étrangeté, et la mort". (pp109-110) Such passages are provocative in their contradiction of the prologue's stated exclusion of metaphysical meanings, which, as a consequence, can be read as a teasing piece of misinformation with the author holding out the lure of something he simultaneously promises not to deliver. ("Il s'agit pourtant ici d'une réalité strictement matérielle, c'est-à-dire qu'elle ne prétend à aucune valeur

allégorique", is followed by, "Le lecteur est donc invité à n'y voir que les choses, gestes, paroles, événements, qui lui sont rapportés, sans chercher à leur donner ni plus ni moins de signification que dans sa propre vie, ou sa propre mort.") It is conceivable, therefore, that the novel's etherized calm may be associated both with its anti-naturalist project, and with the strangeness of human experience and death considered apart from conventional realism. In this respect, the recherché artificiality of the text may be compared with the realism of Ionesco, who once explained that "c'est en m'enfonçant dans le banal, en poussant à fond, [...] les clichés les plus éculés du langage de tous les jours que j'ai essayé d'atteindre à l'expression de l'étrange où me semble" that he hoped to "atteindre à l'expression de l'étrange où me semble baigner toute l'existence".<sup>70</sup> By similarly withdrawing the comfort of familiarity, *Dans le labyrinthe* sends the reader back to a contemplation of the 'reality' that on one level it denies, and so frustrates its own studied acquiescence to futility: a play of perspectives for which the "avis au lecteur" has, in retrospect, prepared us.

#### V. ii. The fissure of the human consciousness

If the surreal quality of the landscape seems to simultaneously invite and discourage a projection of readerly angst, its effect on the soldier is much less equivocal. As with *Les gommages*, it is in the main character's reaction to the strangeness of his world that the real tragic potential of the novel lies. The absence of significant communication between the soldier and other characters in the novel, for example, is consistent with Robbe-Grillet's assumptions about the lack of natural communion between one person and another, between one person and the environment. But the soldier is far from accepting this silence with the requisite indifference, filling it, rather, with his own disquiet in the manner of the tragic hero Robbe-Grillet describes in the essay on tragedy. Thus: "La distance entre [son] cri [...] et l'interlocuteur muet (peut-être sourd) auquel il s'adresse, devient une angoisse [...]".<sup>71</sup> This is apparent in the soldier's encounter with the woman, (pp69-72) and in the paranoia that nearly forces him into a run when a row of faces stare out of an upper window: "Ils me prennent pour un espion", he tells himself. (p127) Similarly, while the soldier's fatigue fails to evoke the statuesque quality of despair in a Racinian drama, it bespeaks the exaggerated heaviness that might weigh down a man's steps in a nightmare, for example, and so acquires the phantasmic quality of a more primitive emotion. The fact that his constant worry about the box is out of all proportion to its object makes no difference to the sense of oppression that dominates his mind. It is, indeed, the difficulty of not knowing and of being incapable of formulating his distress —

<sup>70</sup> Notes et contre-notes, p15.

<sup>71</sup> Pour un nouveau roman, p54.

"il n'est pas encore parvenu à formuler ses inquiétudes" — that seems to intensify his distress.

As in *Les gommages*, then, "what threatens" in *Dans le labyrinthe*, "is nowhere",<sup>72</sup> but the illusion of threat is sufficiently powerful to unbalance the character and subvert the calm materialism of the narrative. For it is the activity of the human consciousness that is responsible for throwing the immaculate planes and surfaces out of alignment. Indeed, their perfection only serves to highlight the "flaw" of consciousness which cannot forget the absence around which it is precariously constructed. The soldier who first appears as a strange outgrowth of the lamppost against which he leans demonstrates his difference from physical reality in the novel again and again. His humanity is revealed in the uncertainty which expresses itself in bodily gestures — when he stretches out his hand, for example, "en crispant les doigts, comme celui qui craindrait de laisser échapper quelque détail dont il se croit sur le point de fixer le souvenir" — (p151) and through the insecurity which such constant uncertainty generates, as seen in the anxious hold he keeps on the box. If, therefore, the box is an anti-symbol of absence, as Olga Bernal has suggested, a metaphor for "le creux" that is "au centre de la réalité humaine" in Robbe-Grillet, it is also a symbol of something approaching 'tragic' pathos.<sup>73</sup> For in the gap between its real (un)importance and the importance the soldier ascribes to it, between the banality, in other words, of the letters addressed to Henri Martin, and the anxiety about their delivery that makes the soldier sleep with the box under his mattress, is designated the distance between mind and world, consciousness and things.<sup>74</sup> And because of the exaggerated nature of the contrast between the two in *Dans le labyrinthe* the potential for experiencing their difference as alienating seems to be disproportionately magnified. The expulsion of tragic humanism, in other words, is so radical as to create the kind of mind/world imbalance Robbe-Grillet insists is endemic to tragedy. The surfaces are as uninformative as the faces are uncommunicative so that the soldier's fears remain disconcertingly nebulous, unlocatable in any time/space framework, both nowhere

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<sup>72</sup> Heidegger's terms for defining "Angst" as opposed to fear, the latter being experienced in relation to something definite. Cited in *The Two Horizons*, p171.

<sup>73</sup> *Alain Robbe-Grillet: le roman de l'absence*, p122. Bernal still insists that "le roman de Robbe-Grillet n'émet aucun cri de protestation, d'angoisse, aucun symbole de passion tragique". (p129) But note that her definition of tragedy (see her footnote, p128) accords with the narrow one offered by Robbe-Grillet in *Pour un nouveau roman*.

<sup>74</sup> "Le soldat reste là, avec sa boîte dans les mains, se demandant où il va pouvoir la déposer pour la nuit, craignant à la fois de s'en séparer et d'attirer davantage l'attention sur elle. Après beaucoup d'hésitations, il écarte le traversin de la grille en fer peint [...] y dépose la boîte [...] et repousse le traversin contre elle afin de la caler plus solidement. Il pense qu'ainsi, lorsqu'il aura la tête sur le traversin, toute tentative pour s'emparer de la boîte le tirerait de son sommeil, si lourd soit-il." (pp106-107)

and nothing — “[sans] un gouffre où se loger” as Robbe-Grillet phrases it with ironic, but appropriate, poetry in *Pour un nouveau roman*.

For this reason the experience of “angoisse” in *Dans le labyrinthe* is infinitely more understated than Myshkin’s experience of alienation in *The Idiot*. “I have no sense of proportion”, Myshkin says, “my words don’t express my ideas [...]”. (p355) But at least the world of beauty he envisages, like the world of darkling shadows in which he struggles, has a certain “poids de réalité” in Dostoyevsky because of their anchorage in a meaningful frame of reference. In Robbe-Grillet’s silent fantasy world, by contrast, the “conscience malheureuse” is not even granted the relief of recognition. It has no validity, and if, as a consequence, the world and the other are too reticent to provoke its difficulties directly, they are also too neutral to cure it. Tragedy, it seems, is all in the mind. But so long as there is no way out of malaise through other minds and perspectives, the hero is trapped in an unrelievedly bleak mental world.

### V. iii. ‘L’anti-monde contre l’angoisse’

However, following the pattern established by previous novels (including *Les gommes*), the opening and closing pages of *Dans le labyrinthe* provide the criteria according to which the novel and its pathos are intended to be read. The anxious researches of Wallas (*Les gommes*), the perverse erotomania of Mathias (*Le voyeur*), the jealousy of the anonymous narrator-husband (*La jalousie*), are all bracketted by a formal inventory of the elements from which their adventures will be composed. Likewise, the soldier’s anxiety is seen to be generated and controlled by the deliberations of the narrator-artist whose self-conscious word contains his own. The interpenetration of the material with the subjective that gives the rest of the text its uneasy calm is conspicuously absent from the first and formative lines, where the reader is party to the array of choices facing the writer as he sets about composing a world with its own coherence, its own meaning, its own ‘reality’:

Je suis seul ici, maintenant, bien à l’abri. Dehors il pleut, dehors on marche sous la pluie en courbant la tête [...] dehors il fait froid, le vent souffle dans les feuilles [...] Dehors il y a du soleil, il n’y a pas un arbre, ni un arbuste pour donner de l’ombre, et l’on marche en plein soleil, s’abritant les yeux d’une main tout en regardant devant soi, à quelques mètres devant soi, quelques mètres d’asphalte poussiéreux [...] (p9)

The trying out of different climactic conditions emphasizes the arbitrariness of the writer’s initial choices, while the strong rhythmic patterns give the passage a unity that has nothing to do with meaning or representation, just as “maintenant” helps structure *La*

*jalousie* while remaining essentially meaningless as a temporal expression.

Then, in the final pages, and as if to mock the fears built up in the narrative that has followed this opening, the author performs a last sleight-of-hand, showing with all the guileful generosity of a conjurer the innocent items which have been used in the production of the illusion: the labyrinthine trail of slippers on a dusty floor; patterns on a wallpaper; an umbrella-cum-walking-stick in a hallway. The refrain of the opening ("Dehors il pleut. Dehors on marche sous la pluie en courbant la tête"), returns, leaving the reader with neither disturbing atmospherics nor philosophical questions about human frailties, but with the calm voice of the novelist, asserting, in the manner of Nietzsche's Apollo, a god-like control over the text's uncertainties.

The authorial voice in *Dans le labyrinthe* thus represents the order that prevails over all subsidiary orders and disorders in the text. And, like all impulses towards order, it indicates a desire to master and define the limits of human incertitude: a desire which, I would suggest, comes through as strongly in Robbe-Grillet's text as it does in the humanist and metaphysical-inspired writings of the "speleologists" he disparages in *Pour un nouveau roman*. What Robbe-Grillet calls the novelist of depth is berated in the essay for indulging in metaphysical imperialism in the attempt to conquer the unknown:

Descendu dans l'abîme des passions humaines, [l'écrivain traditionnel] envoyait au monde tranquille en apparence (celui de la surface) des messages de victoire décrivant les mystères qu'il avait touchés du doigt. Et le vertige sacré qui envahissait alors le lecteur, loins d'engendrer l'angoisse ou la nausée, le rassurait au contraire quant à son pouvoir de domination sur le monde.<sup>75</sup>

Even if in *Dans le labyrinthe* such metaphoric heights and depths have been levelled, the same powers of domination are coveted, only the empowering is sought not from metaphysics but from art.

In so far as it articulates the irrational and then draws attention to the process of articulation, the author's *parole* achieves a measure of control over these things: they are "conjuré", in the double sense of being called to mind and dispelled, driven back beyond the formal boundaries set for them by the writer. The view of art implicit in this is one of therapeutic remedy to "l'angoisse", a view expressed by the author more than twenty years later in his autobiographical fiction, *Angélique*. Even though Robbe-Grillet may still subscribe to the idea that the unhappy consciousness is a hallucinatory product of the mind, "angoisse" is acknowledged in this later work as an illusion

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<sup>75</sup> *Pour un nouveau roman*, p22.

formidable enough to demand a response. Accordingly Robbe-Grillet proposes the sublimation of human insecurities, after the manner of Nietzsche, through the creation of an "anti-monde" in art:

Tandis qu'à chaque instant s'effonde devant moi l'univers quotidien l'écriture de l'imaginaire construit à partir du néant lui-même [...] un anti-monde, sur lequel l'angoisse fondamentale ne pourra jamais avoir de prise.<sup>76</sup>

In this "anti-monde", therefore, the reality of human fears and insecurities is to be "dissolved" in the unreality of the world of appearances, which then exploits instability by incorporating it into the formal organization of its own unity. Hence the monster of nightmare is diminished by being looked at by the dreamer and harnessed to his language.

But there is a balance to be achieved in this vanquishing of the monstrous through the charm of illusion. For if chaos is too regimented, too suavely domesticated, it loses its capacity to infuse art with its ambivalence and its implicit excitement. It is perhaps significant that in the earlier works like *La jalousie* and *Le voyeur*, the hero-narrator's struggle for mastery over threatening elements in his world, or in himself, is intense. The authorial word always interjects to calm, organize and reassert its power, but the subjective disorder in the narrative remains a threat to this. *Dans le labyrinthe* repeats and intensifies this incalculability. At the same time, the "circulation of signs" in the 1959 narrative is more readily traced to the same sign, the same voice, namely, the author's. For this reason, order could be said to pose a greater threat to the narrative than disorder, *Dans le labyrinthe* thus announcing the formal perfectionism of novels like *Projet pour une révolution à New York* and *La maison de rendez-vous*. These belong to Robbe-Grillet's middle and later period, and reflect a stylistic assurance, almost bordering on slickness, that is less noticeable in the earlier novels. It is perhaps in the calculated, and apparently complacent, finesse of these later works that the real source of malaise lies, at least, for some of Robbe-Grillet's female readers.

#### V. iv. The exclusions of "la déesse de l'illusion"<sup>77</sup>

Robbe-Grillet has defended his preference for "perfection plastique" in novels like *Projet*

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<sup>76</sup> *Angélique ou l'enchantement*, p126, cf p125. Note that this is a view which Julia Kristeva explores in *Le soleil noir* and Harold Bloom, also, in *Agon. Towards a Theory of Revisionism*.

<sup>77</sup> Robbe-Grillet refers to "la déesse de l'illusion" in *La maison de rendez-vous*, p85. cf also Nietzsche's terms for art as the "goddess of illusion" and a "saving sorceress" in *The Birth of Tragedy*, p60.



and *La maison de rendez-vous* in the context of a discussion of sado-eroticism in *Angélique*. In the discourse of sado-eroticism the geometrical perfection of *Dans le labyrinthe* is repeated in the “surfaces de chair à la perfection abstraite, sans passé, sans lassitude possible, dure et lisse pour l'éternité”.<sup>78</sup> And, as with the aestheticism of *Dans le labyrinthe*, one of the underlying motivations for the flawless erotic body, according to Robbe-Grillet, is the avoidance of tragic significance. He states quite categorically, albeit with malice aforethought, that in the sado-erotic text:

A l'empire immense de la ride (l'empire des signes du déclin, de la mort qui vient et s'installe en nous peu à peu, à notre insu, du poids sur nous de toutes les fatalités trop humaines), s'oppose ici le royaume du lisse, de l'inépuisable, vierge et immarcescible [...] Au monde de l'espoir désespéré qui finit par se soumettre à sa condition tragique succède le ciel, ludique, de l'esprit-roi, qui sera celui de l'eros futur.<sup>79</sup>

What Robbe-Grillet would perhaps not concede is that such a response to human frailty, through either an exclusion or a reduction to the erotically pleasurable, has much in common with the attitude of the humanist tragedian as defined in Robbe-Grillet's essay. In other words, the imposition of unity through the controlling word of the artist, and the reduction of pain to armchair melancholy, cushions malaise with the trappings of a comfortable acceptability (“It's only a game”; “no-one is being hurt”). From the evidence of his later novels in particular (with the exception of *Djinn* and *Le miroir qui revient*) Robbe-Grillet seems not to denounce tragedy so much as to leave its difficulties unaddressed, while continuing to evoke its agonies in the stylized portraits of pain suggested by sado-masochism.

The preoccupation with the “lisse” and the “inépuisable”, in the sado-erotic text indicates one of the differences between Robbe-Grillet and Dostoyevsky in their treatment of suffering generally. Dostoyevsky's awareness of the unattractive aspects of human misery (the unlovely egotism and need of his underground narrators), contrasts strongly with the daintily bloodied garments and pretty gestures of agony in Robbe-Grillet. Hope and beauty, in the first instance, must be wrested from patterns of brokenness, sickness, confusion and doubt. In Robbe-Grillet, on the other hand, the ideal of beauty is consistently pursued in terms of perfection, physical and formal, the flawless nature of the young girl's bodies reflecting the intricate perfection of the narrative's prose.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> *Angélique*, p164.

<sup>79</sup> pp163 and 166.

<sup>80</sup> It is significant in this regard that Nabokov, who seemingly admired Robbe-Grillet as much as Robbe-Grillet admired him (see ‘Robbe-Grillet: “Je n'ai jamais parlé d'autre chose que de moi”’, p7), and who shared Robbe-Grillet's taste for the beautiful and the nubile, was extremely scathing of what he saw as the lack of artistic integrity in Dostoyevsky's depiction of the “tragic misadventures of human

Robbe-Grillet's distaste for bodily signs of mortality may also be contrasted with that of fellow New Novelist, Duras, at the opening of her novel, *L'Amant*, where she presents the reader with an unexpected celebration of aging beauty. Or with the way Bakhtin places mortality and bodily weakness in the context of a festival of life in which everything is renewed, or resurrected. These alternatives to tragedy at least bespeak a readiness to acknowledge something of the reality of suffering before incorporating it into a transforming *vision du monde*.<sup>81</sup> Many of Robbe-Grillet's novels lack this inclusiveness and are consequently not as robustly humorous as they might otherwise be. For this reason, it could be contended that the bleakest "image de détresse" in *Dans le labyrinthe* is not the fissure, representative of the human consciousness, but the relative lack of flaws and discontinuities, with their suggestion that the only alternative to tragedy is escape into a blatantly artificial world from which reminders of one's ungainly humanity are excluded. If the escape-route proposed were humorous, diverting or uplifting, one could perhaps feel a sense of refreshment from having left behind the weight of one's mortality. But it is a curious fact that a number of Robbe-Grillet novels are preoccupied with what is essentially depressing raw material. If there is nothing obviously funny about the soldier's predicament in the labyrinth, several critics have pointed to a morbid trend running through Robbe-Grillet's œuvre. "What [Robbe-Grillet's technique] implies", argues Dennis Porter, "is that something close to a psychosis is a permanent condition of all our lives".<sup>82</sup> And in his 1975 study, Bruce Morrisette summarizes Robbe-Grillet's main themes as concerning: "[les] complexes les plus intimes: crime, passion, érotisme, sadisme, jalousie, désorientation, suggestibilité morbide, angoisse...".<sup>83</sup> The denial of tragedy in theoretical terms makes this obsession with morbid sensuality in Robbe-Grillet all the more striking.

## VI. Conclusion

As the evidence of the novels suggests, Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet's relation to the tragic tradition is a complex one. Despite different premisses the four novels studied in

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dignity". (*Lectures on Russian Literature*, p104) Nabokov's judgement further underlines Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet's different attitudes to the interrelationships of art, ethics, and suffering, while indicating a potentially more appropriate line of comparison than that pursued in this thesis, namely, between Nabokov and Robbe-Grillet.

<sup>81</sup> Similarly, in the area of style, Samuel Beckett offers an alternative contemporary response to the dilemma of representing "mess" and "chaos". The writer's project, in his view, is to find a form that "accommodates the mess" rather than denying it or trying to say that "the chaos is really something else". See 'Beckett by the Madeleine', p23.

<sup>82</sup> 'Sartre, Robbe-Grillet and the Psychotic Hero', p24.

<sup>83</sup> *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet*, pp74-75.

the chapter depict what could be described as the imaginative dimension of doubt which escapes the spiritual or rational determinations of their implied authors. Through their tenuous self-awareness and capacity for imaginative representation and reflection, the novels' characters are also prey to insecurity, disorientation and fear, giving rise to strange dreams and visions in Dostoyevsky, to attacks of paranoia in Robbe-Grillet. At the same time, however, it is this spiritual and imaginative capacity that distinguishes the characters from the "réalité strictement matérielle" which forms the décor for their misadventures, and which indicates the principle vein of optimism in the novels: Myshkin's vision of beauty illuminates the morbid passion of Rogozhin and Nastasya in *The Idiot*, and characters in *Les gommes* invent their own sub-plots in the absence of evidence concerning the 'crime'.

The "flaw" in the case against tragedy has, in conclusion, several significant features. Firstly, there is the difficulty implicit in the assumption that feelings of distress in tragedy are also guarantees of redemption. The limitations of this view are demonstrated in Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* which, with its overtly metaphysical framework, might be considered a promising source of evidence for Robbe-Grillet's essay, 'Nature, humanisme, tragédie'. Although there is undoubtedly an atmosphere of oppressive fatalism in the novel, the characters' response to their dilemma is nevertheless more complex than the essay allows. Secondly, and most importantly, is the flaw of consciousness itself which ensures that, even without the kind of metaphysical context for suffering Dostoyevsky's novel provides, malaise persists. Indeed, without a meaningful framework in which they can be addressed, irrational feelings of disturbance are all the more difficult to dispel. Robbe-Grillet, for the opposite reason to Dostoyevsky, therefore, could be said to compound the tragic dilemma.

The stronger emphasis on form in Robbe-Grillet makes him, ironically, more of a tragedian in the classical sense than Dostoyevsky, despite the New Novelist's theoretical rejection of tragic meaningfulness. For tragic vision for the Greeks was most often mitigated not by metaphysics, but by the beauty of the form in which it was encapsulated. As Krieger confirms:

fearful and even demoniac in its revelations, the [tragic] vision needed the ultimate soothing power of the aesthetic form which contained it [...] the formal requirements which transcended, or rather absorbed this mentality and restored order to the universe threatened by it.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> *The Tragic Vision*, p3.

Although Robbe-Grillet's heroes are often inarticulate, an overriding interest in the "formal requirements" of his art enables him to "absorb" their disorder within the order of his own superbly organized text. This then creates tensions between form and (implied) content, especially in the sado-erotic texts, where a preoccupation with instruments of torture and morbid passion contradicts the calm austerity of the prose. Robbe-Grillet's narratives, in this sense, consciously deny the reality of what they so insistently represent.

Dostoyevsky's Christian ideals and Robbe-Grillet's allegiance to the "esprit-roi" of artifice represent different ways of responding to the irregularities, frailty and incompleteness I have associated with tragic experience in the chapter. However, both the spiritual utopia of Myshkin's dream and the purist nihilism of Robbe-Grillet's labyrinth are represented as imperfectly realized abstractions in texts that reflect the ongoing ambivalence of human experience. The fact that both novelists show a certain fascination for things that, on one level, they deny, points to their mutual implication in this ambivalence. It also gives their exploration of uncertainty a dimension that the scepticism of Pyrrho seems to have lacked. His repeated emphasis on common sense and moderation of feeling suggests either that he was better able to quell irrational disturbances, or, perhaps, that like Robbe-Grillet's Dupont, he suffered from a conspicuous "manque de fantaisie" in his perception of things. In view of the morbid element running through both novelists' œuvre one could argue that he was better without this imaginative susceptibility.<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet valued the irregularities of mind and imagination to the point of preferring their perturbations to the ease and tranquillity advocated by Pyrrho. The rejection of Pyrrhonian tranquillity is the subject of my next and final chapter.

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<sup>85</sup> In his introduction to *Sextus Empiricus. The Major Writings*, Philip Haillie notes two traditions of thought concerning Pyrrho's attempts to free himself from unnecessary disturbances through the practice of detachment. The first, recorded by Diogenes Laertius, tells how: "he would not look where he was going, and that only his faithful common-sensical friends kept him alive in the face of his disregard for "carts, precipices, dogs or what not". The second, less extreme, and favoured by Haillie himself, represents Pyrrho as an eminently sensible man concerned for his fellow-passengers in a storm at sea: "at the height of the storm, when the fears of his fellow passengers were at their height, he pointed out for their instruction a little pig standing there on the deck calmly munching its food, and he told them that the unperturbedness of that pig was the mark of wisdom. According to this second tradition, Pyrrho did not strip himself, or try to do so, of his sensibilities; he was solicitous of the feelings of his fellow passengers enough to give them a little demonstration, and he advocated a life imitative of a pig calmly eating rather than imitative of an ascetic trying to act as if he had no body". (pp11-13) Since Robbe-Grillet and Dostoyevsky insist that the capacity to fantasize is what distinguishes man from the animals as well as from the material universe, it is doubtful that they would be convinced of the merit of Pyrrho's advocacy of "a life imitative of a pig calmly eating".

## 5 Writing against death: the novel as sceptical process

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Writing so as not to die, [...] or perhaps even speaking so as not to die is a task undoubtedly as old as the word. The most fateful decisions are inevitably suspended during the course of a story.  
(Michel Foucault)

### I. i. Sceptical doubt and the pursuit of tranquillity

In Book One of the *Major Writings*, Sextus Empiricus records that scepticism “has its inception and cause [...] in the hope of attaining mental tranquillity”.<sup>1</sup> Desiring to avoid the heated controversies of the dogmatists, therefore, the sceptic plays off the different arguments against each other, undermining the dogmatists’ positions and simultaneously achieving tranquillity for himself as a result of suspending judgement. The scepticism of Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet seems in many ways to grow from the opposite motivation. What is feared is not the advent of new evidence calling for a more rigorous scrutiny of conflicting data, but the lack of new material, the absence of conflict, and the prospect of an untroubled haven away from the adventure of discovery. Tranquillity is shunned not sought after. If this is the case the uncertainty in their novels may be largely a willed uncertainty, what Bernal has called “un oubli feint, un refus de savoir et de reconnaître”,<sup>2</sup> and which reflects a preference for problems and their outworking rather than for discovery and the ‘moment of truth’.

This chapter explores more fully the dual capacity of consciousness to undermine and reconstrue its own possibilities. Only where Chapter 4 concentrated on the characters’ struggles with the destabilizing effects of their own imaginations the present chapter looks at responses to a quite different threat, namely, the encounter with meaning-systems that, in providing a refuge from the problems of unintelligibility, also appear to impose restrictions on the impulse to explore and create. Just as the two writers’ response to tragedy, then, indicates a departure from the practice of moderation Sextus

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<sup>1</sup> *Sextus Empiricus. The Major Writings*, p35. cf also the definition of scepticism, quoted in my introductory chapter, on pp32-33 of the same work: “Scepticism is an ability to place in antithesis, in any manner whatever, appearances and judgements, and thus — because of the equality of force in the objects and arguments opposed — to come first of all to a suspension of judgement and then to mental tranquillity”.

<sup>2</sup> *Alain Robbe-Grillet: le roman de l'absence*, p158.

recommends, so their interpretation of uncertainty over "matters of opinion" reflects a determination to inflame rather than avoid controversy, craving the stimulus it affords and resisting the restrictions implicit in its resolution. Discussing the vitality of Dostoyevsky's work, Malcolm Jones speaks of "Dostoyevsky's belief that man and society are most alive when they are in the process of questing, in a state of disharmony, in chaos, when they are seeking an answer. When all is clear then the world stops and art no longer has a role to play".<sup>3</sup> This is an opinion readily espoused by Robbe-Grillet as is evident from his reference in *Pour un nouveau roman* to art's dependence on a constant "remise en question" if it is to survive:

L'Art est vie. Rien n'y est gagné de façon définitive. Il ne peut exister sans cette remise en question permanente.<sup>4</sup>

Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet thus equally react against inertia in their novels, be it emotional or intellectual, avoiding commitment to any final statement that might impose restrictions on their thinking.

It might be objected that the Greek scepticism which is the constant reference point for the two writers' uncertainty was also concerned to promote argumentation, and hence also to avoid the cessation of activity Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet deplore. Philip Haillie implies this when he makes a distinction in his introduction to *Sextus Empiricus* between "tranquility" and "paralysis", a "peaceful life" and "an imitation of death".<sup>5</sup> A.A. Long, likewise, points to Pyrrho's encouragement of debate despite his aim to "[free] people from the disturbance caused by certain beliefs, especially beliefs which conflict with each other".<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, there is a significant distinction to be made between debate that is pursued to avoid conflict, and debate that is deliberately maintained to exacerbate it. Dostoyevsky's underground man explains the rationale behind an artificially cultivated uncertainty in uncompromising, even exaggerated terms, when he suggests that: "[...] if the formula for all our desires and whims is some day discovered [...] then it is possible that man will at once cease to want anything, indeed I suppose it is possible that he will cease to exist".<sup>7</sup> According to Dostoyevsky's narrator the *élan vital* of all humanity is threatened by the finality of definitions and formulae, and a

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<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Jones paraphrasing V. Ya. Kirpotin in *Dostoyevsky. The Novel of Discord*, p18.

<sup>4</sup> *Pour un nouveau roman*, p136.

<sup>5</sup> p7. Haillie suggests all three "practical-wisdom" philosophies (i.e. scepticism, stoicism, epicureanism) "wanted tranquillity, not paralysis; a peaceful life, not an imitation of death".

<sup>6</sup> *Hellenistic Philosophy*, p78.

<sup>7</sup> *Notes from Underground*, p34.

subconscious recognition of this is, he maintains, at the root of people's impulse to take apart the "stone wall" of facts and the very projects they are working on. Advancing a similar theory is French philosopher and critic Michel Foucault, who refers the problem specifically to the writer when he proposes the energy of language, with its dual capacity for creation and destruction, as a means of defence against intellectual and psychic stasis, or, what he calls the "black wall of death". Language 'defeats' death, he claims, by lengthening the temporal distance between a man and his fate, or between a project and its completion, by talking about them, and so delaying the moment of realization through the backwards and forwards movement of a verbal exchange:

The gods send disasters to mortals so that they can tell of them, but men speak of them so that misfortunes will never be fully realized, so that their fulfillment will be averted in the distance of words [...].<sup>8</sup>

It may be deduced from these responses that there is a lot at stake in the defence of the sceptical position. For Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet doubt seems paradoxically allied to faith in the value of their creative freedom, and to an almost Nietzschean will to power over the finality of naming and defining which prefigures the finality of death. This creative will requires further definition, however, before its appropriateness as a generative force in their novels may be assessed.

#### I. ii. The creative will in Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet: "creaturely freedom" and "ma volonté d'intervention"

Philosophers, writes Nietzsche, "are in the habit of speaking of 'will' as though it were the best-known thing in the world. [...] Willing seems to me to be, above all, something *complicated*, something that is a unity in word only".<sup>9</sup> Defining the concept of the will has certainly been complicated in our own era by radically changing views of what it means to be human, as reflected, for example, in the reluctance to employ metaphors of depth or interiority because of their association with metaphysical humanism (an attitude frequently reflected in Robbe-Grillet's essays), and in the awareness of the role played by language in constituting subjectivity.<sup>10</sup> The idea of voluntarily expressing

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<sup>8</sup> *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, p54. Harold Bloom expresses a similar idea in *Agon. Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, p124: "Drive, for poets, is the urge for immortality, and can be called the largest of all poetic tropes, since it makes even of death, literal death, our death, a figuration rather than a reality".

<sup>9</sup> *Beyond Good and Evil*, p19.

<sup>10</sup> For Kristeva, for example, language belongs to the symbolic order through which we must pass to acquire as well as articulate our subjectivity. For Derrida,

one's 'self', as though the self were entirely independent of its medium of expression, is qualified, if not discredited, by this change of emphasis. Nevertheless, a suspicion of humanism and consciousness of language has not eliminated the notion of creative intentionality, which is, moreover, strongly championed by the novelists in question, however complicated it may prove to be in their works.

What is interesting in Nietzsche's definition of the will is his suggestion that "in every willing there is first of all a multiplicity of feelings: the feeling of a condition to get *away* from, the feeling of a condition to get *to*", and his conclusion that the will is "above all [...] a passion — the passion of commanding".<sup>11</sup> The "feeling of a condition to get away from" and "to get to" which Nietzsche refers to may be related to the contrary effects in writing of the impulse to evade — in the text's avoidance of formulae, for example, its refraction of simple, monologic perspectives and diversifying of the signifier — and of the impulse to master — in the text's recreation of a unity and coherence in its own terms.<sup>12</sup> There is arguably a double movement of dispersal and reconstruction in all writing, as elements are reformulated according to the stylistic and thematic priorities established by the writer. For Nietzsche, certainly, this double action is directly associated with the "will to power" implicit in the creative drive. The "will to power" in this context concerns not so much the idea of a self attempting to appropriate other selves as the self's drive to create its own values and impose them on a world which is otherwise perceived as indeterminate: "To stamp the character of *Being* on the process of *becoming* — that is the highest will to power [...] It is the impulse behind the acquisition, ordering and creation of knowledge, and behind creativity itself".<sup>13</sup>

A rather different interpretation of Nietzsche's movement "towards", and "away from", is offered by the Russian Orthodoxy which forms part of the ideological backdrop to Dostoyevsky's texts. The Orthodox notion of freedom, as theologian Georges Florovsky explains, is "disclosed first of all in the equal possibility of two ways: to God and away

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however, language is a play of signifiers which disperses the notion of subjectivity, while for Foucault, written language can be a labyrinth in which we lose ourselves and our identity "d'état civil": "Ne me demandez pas qui je suis et ne me dites pas de rester le même: c'est une morale d'état-civil; elle régit nos papiers. Qu'elle nous laisse libres quand il s'agit d'écrire". (*L'archéologie du savoir*, p28)

<sup>11</sup> *Beyond Good and Evil*, p20.

<sup>12</sup> Harold Bloom would call this activity "misprision", (*Agon*) while Roland Barthes engages in it in his writings by breaking up ethical and ideological unities and, increasingly, proposing a new ground for the text's meaning in his preoccupation with words as fetishes in a private code (*Le plaisir du texte*, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*).

<sup>13</sup> Cited in *A Study of Nietzsche*, p118.



from God", or, towards the other and towards the self.<sup>14</sup> Florovsky describes this freedom not as a once and for all choice so much as an ongoing capacity for choice and creativity that acts as a "supra-natural challenging goal" to which humanity responds:

This challenging goal is an aim, an aim that can be realized only through the *self-determination* and efforts of the creature. Therefore the process of created becoming is real in its freedom, and free in its reality, and it is by this becoming that what-was-not reaches fulfilment [...] In it is room for creation, construction, for re-construction — not only in the sense of recovery, but also in the sense of generating what is new.<sup>15</sup>

Some of the costs of the creaturely incompleteness of which Florovsky writes were examined in Chapter 4 in terms of tragic experience. In the present chapter the phenomenon of incompleteness is discussed principally in terms of the capacity for self-determination, concentrating, therefore, on the voluntary initiatives of the characters rather than on the involuntary mechanisms that disrupt those initiatives. In Dostoyevsky's novels the capacity for self-determination is not without ambivalence, however, being as important to Nietzschean power-games as it is to the drama of faith.

As far as Robbe-Grillet is concerned, Nietzsche's analysis of the creative impulse is singularly appropriate. In every phase of Robbe-Grillet's dialogue with different theories of meaning one of the points to remain constant is his confidence in the human ability to impose form and order on the world — "nous reportons sur l'homme tout notre espoir: ce sont les formes qu'il crée qui peuvent apporter des significations au monde"<sup>16</sup> — even though this form and order is seen as arbitrary rather than absolute in relation to the world's otherness. What most concerns Robbe-Grillet is the individual freedom to create in which the other plays a significant but secondary role. A passing interest in the structuralist-inspired notion of language as the prime generator of the text, and the writer as product, therefore, of his own writing, has effected no noticeable change to Robbe-Grillet's belief in the artist's powers of manipulation and control. In more recent years Robbe-Grillet has explicitly repudiated the idea of the writer as anonymous scriptor.<sup>17</sup>

I have suggested in previous chapters that there are similarities between Robbe-Grillet's understanding of consciousness and the principles of both phenomenology

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<sup>14</sup> *Creation and Redemption*, p48.

<sup>15</sup> p73.

<sup>16</sup> *Pour un nouveau roman*, p120. This remark appears in an essay published in 1961.

<sup>17</sup> See his 1985 interview with Jean-Jacques Brochier and his 1984 work, *Le miroir qui revient*, pp10-11.

(Chapter 3) and of existentialism (Chapter 4). The present chapter, however, assumes a closer affinity between Robbe-Grillet and existentialism, despite Robbe-Grillet's obvious predilection for phenomenological terminology.<sup>18</sup> This is because of the increasingly confident emphasis in Robbe-Grillet on the hero-narrator, and, more especially, his implied author, as "centralizing masters" of meaning; something which, strictly speaking, phenomenology disallows but which existentialism accepts as axiomatic.<sup>19</sup> More important to Robbe-Grillet than the interaction between subject and object, mind and world, is the writer's indisputable power to organize and control his material, and this comes through in a 1972 comment, where he describes writing as an expression of his "volonté d'intervention",<sup>20</sup> and in a later public address, where he defines the writer's role as that of a "creator of forms, an organizer of forms".<sup>21</sup>

In order to analyze the phenomenon of volition in association with creativity, and to see how this, in turn, relates to the cultivation of doubt, I have selected four novels: Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*; and Robbe-Grillet's *La jalousie* and *La maison de rendez-vous*. In Dostoyevsky I wish in particular to concentrate on the problem of belief as presented in an earlier and in the last of his novels; and in Robbe-Grillet, on the way the organizing centre of earlier narratives is displaced, to be identified increasingly with the authorial voice in later works. In both novelists there is something of Nietzsche's "feeling of a condition to get away from" and "the feeling of a condition to get to", as each writer attempts to transcend the particular limits within which they think and create.

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<sup>18</sup> Note, also, Kaufmann's comparison between Nietzsche and Sartre in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, where Kaufmann suggests that both Sartre and Nietzsche evaluated man in terms of "passion and its mastery, independence of convention, and that creative freedom which finds ultimate expression in being a law unto oneself." (p42)

<sup>19</sup> The term "centralizing master" of meaning is Ricœur's. See *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, p27. Note, however, that Ricœur attributes this tendency to Husserl himself, a principle contributor to the phenomenological heritage. See my comments on the solipsistic implications of Husserl in Chapter 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Colloque de Cérisy II*, 1972, p159.

<sup>21</sup> 'Order and Disorder', p3. Translated and published in 1977, from an oral communication given in 1976.

## II. i. The "will to power"

*Crime and Punishment* could be read as an anticipation of Nietzsche's commentary on the will to power.<sup>22</sup> The murder of the old pawnbroker is an attempt by the hero to prove to himself that "everything is in a man's own hands", (p20) and that anything that stands in the way of self-expansion must be appropriated or set aside. In fact, Alyona poses no real threat to Raskolnikov and he gains nothing from her death. Although in a state of abject poverty he does not use the money or articles stolen from her flat after the murder, hiding them first in his room and later under a stone in the street. Like the murder itself these have a symbolic function in relation to Raskolnikov's self-will, representing a testing of his theories about an élite class of people to which he aspires to belong.

Six months earlier on leaving the university, Raskolnikov has written an article in which he expresses the idea that people are roughly divided into two categories: the ordinary and the extraordinary. As Porfiry, the examining magistrate summarizes:

The ordinary must lead a life of strict obedience and have no right to transgress the law because, you see, they are ordinary. Whereas the extraordinary people have a right to commit any crime they like and transgress the law in any way just because they happen to be extraordinary. (p276)

Because of their exceptional originality the extraordinary class of people, Raskolnikov goes on to explain, need to be able to pursue their ideas without the confining pressure of the laws that govern other people's actions. There can be "no question here of any permission or prohibition", says Raskolnikov, or of the scruples that hold a man back from the pursuit of his goal and dictate the style of its achievement. The impulse for mastery carries the extraordinary man beyond such limitations, to the point where he is ready to commit crime if it serves his purpose. What is important, Raskolnikov insists to Sonia later in the narrative, is "Freedom and power — power above all. Power over all the tumbling vermin and over all the ant-hill. That's our goal. Remember that..." (p345)

Raskolnikov's division of society into two classes of people, the law-abiding and the self-assertive, is comparable to Nietzsche's categories of the weak and strong-willed and his identification, with Raskolnikov, of the strong with an élite class of being. In

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<sup>22</sup> *Crime and Punishment* was published in 1865-1866. *The Will to Power* is based on selections from Nietzsche's notebooks from 1883-1888.

"real life", says Nietzsche, there is only "*strong will and weak will*", and the latter is identified with feelings of "constraint, necessity, having-to-obey, pressure, and lack of freedom",<sup>23</sup> while the former is associated with the readiness to create one's own constraints and necessities, acting always for one's own advancement and the "enhancement of a similarly elect portion of mankind".<sup>24</sup> As a student Raskolnikov has already set himself apart from his fellows, despising their company and interests and giving the impression of someone who is "keeping something to himself". (p69) The murder of Alyona is his first attempt to actively identify with the "extraordinary" class of person.

## II. ii. Self-regulated doubt

Doubt plays a significant role in Raskolnikov's bid to identify himself with the Nietzschean superman by committing a crime. Described as "a sceptic [...] fond of abstract reasoning", (p338) Raskolnikov employs casuistry to remove moral obstacles to his plan to kill the old woman. The plan takes shape in his mind gradually, having been helped at its inception by a conversation Raskolnikov overhears between a student and an army officer about Alyona and her sister Lizaveta. After agreeing the old woman is a malicious old harridan "of no use to anybody and who actually does harm to everybody", the pair amuse themselves with moral quibbles and discuss the advantages to mankind of killing the old pawnbroker, questioning at the same time the meaning of the moral code that would contradict their proposal: "People talk of duty or conscience. Well, I have nothing against duty or conscience, but are you quite sure we know what those words mean?" (p85) Hearing this echo of his own nascent idea, Raskolnikov is encouraged in the speculative activity that enables him, too, to reduce another human being to "a simple sum in arithmetic" as he tries out different perspectives on the question of human value: "What if man isn't really a beast", he asks after witnessing Sonia's exploitation by her family, "for if he is not, then all the rest is just prejudice, just imagined fears, and there is nothing to stop you from doing anything you like, and that's as it should be!" (p44) Raskolnikov uses the same subversive generalizations to goad himself to murder when, anticipating a possible weakening of resolve, he relegates his fears to the realm of disease and conveniently dissociates his act from ethical considerations: "there was [...] no danger of his reason or will-power being in any way affected during the carrying out of his plan, simply because what he intended to do was 'not a crime'". (p90)

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<sup>23</sup> *Beyond Good and Evil*, p24.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in *A Study of Nietzsche*, p123.

This is the beginning of the movement of evasion and dispersal that presages the Nietzschean "passion of commanding" in the will to power. For Raskolnikov is manipulating doubt in the interests of self-assertion, undermining conventional codes and definitions the better to impose his own significations. Through the intellectual quibbling of his hero, Dostoyevsky illustrates the way doubt can become a "self-regulated indetermination",<sup>25</sup> enhancing the individual's capacity to define the world according to his/her own predispositions, rather than expressing intellectual curiosity. Curiosity can only be uneasily yoked with the will to power since it may always lead to the apprehension of things which oppose one's own theories and projects. If Raskolnikov were open to the challenge of sceptical inquiry it is possible that, like the underground man in *Notes*, he would do nothing at all, being continually distracted by objections to his plan:

to be sure of everything seemed to him absolutely impossible [...] He could never, for instance, imagine that the time would come when he would stop thinking, get up and — just go there. (p89)

Recognizing, however, that the capacity for speculation could weaken his will and prevent action, Raskolnikov deliberately subdues the doubts which undermine his challenge to conventional morality. In the first part of the novel, then, Dostoyevsky's hero entertains doubts which serve his purpose, while suppressing doubts which undermine his confidence by reminding him of meanings and values not of his own invention.

## II. iii. An aesthetic rather than an existential superman

But how truly Nietzsche spoke when he wrote that willing is a "complicated" thing, as Raskolnikov discovers that the strength of his resolve, the will to will, is sapped by the confusion of its own allegiances. Does Raskolnikov really want power, or only the illusion of power? "I only wanted to dare" he remarks later to Sonia by way of explanation, (p431) indicating a certain hesitation, not so much over the ethics of his act, but over the "passion of commanding" which ostensibly motivates it. Richard Peace suggests that Raskolnikov has misread his own 'text' in so far as the "mere fact that he had to prove himself" by committing the murder in the first place, "shows that he secretly had doubts about his being a Napoleonic man, and this alone shows that he was not entitled to commit the crime".<sup>26</sup> In other words, Raskolnikov is a man of "ordinary"

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<sup>25</sup> Coleridge's assessment of Cartesian doubt, cited in *Saving the Text*, p1.

<sup>26</sup> Dostoyevsky. *An Examination of the Major Novels*, p48.

rather than “extraordinary” abilities who has simply (and disastrously) overreached himself.

It could also be argued that Raskolnikov has mistaken the nature of the real “passion of commanding” which animates him. In the early stages of the narrative it is made clear to the reader that Raskolnikov is uncomfortable with the idea of consequences, and so, with the incalculable errors and calamities that attach to human decision (the fact, for example, that Lisaveta turns up unexpectedly at the flat so that Raskolnikov is ‘forced’ to kill her as well as her sister). At times he does not wish to be associated with his act of rebellion, being anxious to transfer responsibility for it onto something, or someone, else, such as fate or the devil, suggesting that he wants power in temporary and reversible forms but not if it is to be attached to lasting effects for which he may be answerable. The earlier, accidental meeting with Lisaveta, through which he learns when her sister will be alone in her apartment, is greeted like a blow of doom: “he suddenly felt with all his being that he no longer possessed any freedom of reasoning or will”; (p81) and when searching for reasons to give to Sonia for the murder he comes up with the idea that the “devil did it” (“the devil dragged me there [...] It was the devil who killed the old hag, not I”). (p433) Raskolnikov wants the abstract powers of the underground man and the freedom to defer meaning interminably, rather than the existential powers of the man who uses his freedom to define himself through action.

This makes Raskolnikov not an existential but an aesthetic superman whose “passion of commanding” is associated with the desire to unmake and subvert rather than with the desire to define and to then commit himself to his affirmations. In a discussion of Nietzsche and Hegel, Geoffrey Hartman makes an intriguing distinction along these lines between the will to power associated with the desire to monopolize ‘truth’, and the will to power associated with the “artistic illusion”. In the latter case, “The wit of art” may be seen as “a will to power over the will to power”.<sup>27</sup> In other words, art’s play with fantasy-worlds and definitions allow it to undermine the authority of recognized allegiances, while, watchful of the tyranny implicit in this process, it offers only the arbitrary, changeable coherence of its own forms. The process arguably bears some resemblance to the “wit” of the Pyrrhonist who, in his balancing of contrary arguments, sidesteps commitment to truth-statements. But whereas the Pyrrhonist’s “wit” is deployed in the interests of withdrawing from the fray, the dreamer-anarchist perversely seeks the effects of a conflict whose terms of reference he denies, entertaining subversive ideas, while declining to involve himself in subversive action. Raskolnikov,

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<sup>27</sup> *Saving the Text*, p47.

who calls himself an "aesthetic louse", seem to conform more readily to this latter pattern than to the pattern of behaviour appropriate to a character who wants 'real' power "over all the tumbling vermin and over all the ant-hill". His enjoyment is the intellectual and aesthetic one derived from playing with ideas, not executing them, and so, when the "time for thinking" is exchanged for the "time for reality", like the underground man, he "funks" it ("You funk'd it, you were scared of reality, you panicked!").<sup>28</sup>

Raskolnikov's existential squeamishness and impulse to be master of a fantasy-world would seem to render his dreams of power innocuous and even 'innocent'. Raskolnikov is an artist who temporarily 'forgot' himself, or, who, in failing to make the necessary distinction between reality and fantasy betrays a familiar form of psychosis. For art is a play-ground, an arena for hypotheses and experiment that is kept separate from the world of social consequences and responsibilities.<sup>29</sup> It may consequently be seen as a refuge from the extremism of murder, and the religious mysticism that seems to be the existential alternative to crime in the novel. But Dostoyevsky refuses to divorce his characters' aesthetic needs from their ethical responsibilities. Furthermore, ideas and fantasies do lead to action in Raskolnikov's case, suggesting that, while there is an enormous gap between theory and practice, dream and reality, and while the inability to make any distinction between the two is indicative of psychosis, yet to keep them permanently separate requires a form of contorsionism emasculating to one's humanity. So Dostoyevsky's underground man reasons when he reaches the end of his monologue: "we don't even know whose side to be on or where to give our allegiance [...] We even find it difficult to be human beings, men with real flesh and blood of *our own* [...] Soon we shall invent a method of being born from an idea".<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Notes from Underground*, p70. Note the distress of the underground man as he realizes that he, like Raskolnikov, does not 'really' want the powers he enjoys in his fantasy-world: "They would desert Zvertov; he would sit in a corner, silent and shamefaced, and I would annihilate him. Then, perhaps, I would be reconciled with him and drink to our intimate friendship, but the worst and most shameful thing was that even then I knew, knew very well, knew for certain, that in reality none of this was what I wanted, in reality I had absolutely no wish to either subjugate or captivate them, and that I wouldn't give a farthing for such a result even if I did attain it". (p70)

<sup>29</sup> The definition of art as a "terrain de jeu" is Robbe-Grillet's although the respective roles of 'dulce' and 'utile' in art differ according to the preferences of the writer/critic. Note, for example, Volosinov's statement that aesthetic communication must participate "in the unitary flow of social life". (*Freudianism: a Marxist Critique*, p98)

<sup>30</sup> p123.

## II. iv. The fear of finality

If ethical concerns qualify the will to power endemic to both artist and superman, Dostoyevsky nonetheless remains hesitant about delivering his hero, with his sophistry and his "wit", into the arms of a settled, religious assurance. It is a simplification to say, as Nabokov does in a moment of irritation, that "for the untying of every psychological and psychopathic knot [Dostoevski] inevitably leads us to Christ".<sup>31</sup> It is certainly true that the path of conversion seems coextensive with the plot of crime and punishment in the narrative. Especially since both the murder and the process of regeneration that follows are caught up in the same voluntary movement towards, and away from, the self which Florovsky tells us is indicative of man's spiritual destiny. The moment of confession, when Raskolnikov decides to tell Sonia about the murder, is seen in terms of the same concerted effort of will as that required by the crime itself: "To his mind that moment was uncannily like the moment when he stood behind the old woman and, disengaging the hatchet from the sling, felt that there was not a moment to lose". (p422) Appropriately, the movement from confession to repentance, and from repentance to a confession of faith, is then attended by a comparable degree of anguish and uncertainty to that experienced during the period leading up to the crime.

Yet while we witness the crime, we do not witness the untying of the "psychopathic knot". If Raskolnikov turns increasingly to Sonia and so, to involvement with others, he does not lose his predilection for an infinite deferral of meaning, with the result that his 'repentance' takes the form of a continual changing of mind, rather than the decisive change of mind and heart that is associated with conversion. For where the confession to Sonia enables him to retain some control over the telling and interpretation of his own narrative, repentance requires that, ultimately, Raskolnikov also accept the interpretation another gives it; namely, in the admission of wrong, submission to the other of the law is also implicit. The contemplation of the ultimate abandonment to Christ's love, however, for which the other of the law which says "thou shalt not kill" is only a shadow in Dostoyevsky, brings with it the fear of a limit placed on Raskolnikov's will and of an unbearable finality being imposed on his personal narrative.

The novel thus seems to create an insoluble dilemma. On the one hand, there is the movement away from God and the other which is associated with murderous egotism and the will to power. On the other hand, there is the movement towards God which is

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<sup>31</sup> *Lectures on Russian Literature*, p127.



associated, in Raskolnikov's mind at least, with oppressive restrictions on his freedom. Given Raskolnikov's insistence, almost to the last pages of the narrative, that his crime was only a crime because it was not successful, (p552) it would seem as though the prospect of putting an end to his struggle against the law and against conscience is more intolerable to him than the prospect of isolation from others which, according to his author, is also unbearable (Magarshack cites Dostoyevsky's comments to this effect in his introduction to the Penguin edition: "The feeling of separation and dissociation from humanity which he experiences at once after he has committed the crime, is something he cannot bear".)<sup>32</sup> On discovering that Porfiry has no conclusive proof for his suspicions, Raskolnikov, who, at one moment hankers after punishment, at the next, is stimulated by the reflection that he has yet another chance to exercise his ingenuity and reassume control:

'There's nothing *definite* now, nothing definite', Raskolnikov kept repeating [...] feeling more cheerful than ever.  
'Now we can carry on with the fight!' [...] he remembered his 'lack of spirit' with a feeling of shame and contempt'.(p373)

Raskolnikov's delight at being released from anything "definite", which Foucault tells us is symbolic of the "black wall of death", is suggestive of a fundamental preference for the "everlasting process of discovery" to the "supra-natural challenging goal" of faith.

## II. v. Talking around and to the truth

How far can Dostoyevsky be identified with his hero in this preference? Malcolm Jones suggests there is a close correlation between the doubting heroes in the novels and their implied author. After referring to Fernandez's contention that Dostoyevsky's novels are so many attempts on the author's part to prove to himself that Orthodoxy was right, Jones goes on to argue: "This may be correct, but of no less importance is the fact that this proof was never secured: it is the search, the probing, the process of discovering, the 'dialectic', which characterise Dostoyevsky's novels, and which ensure their continued appeal to those who do not share his private values". And, finally, "Dostoyevsky seems to share Ippolit's view that: 'It is life that is important, life alone, the continuous and everlasting process of discovery, not the discovery itself'".<sup>33</sup> Jones thus defends the opposite case to Nabokov's, the implication being that the final step of faith that is feared by the hero of *Crime and Punishment* represents the last word that the author, as well as the hero, must never speak. This reluctance is not due to any incapacity, but to

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<sup>32</sup> Introduction to *Crime and Punishment*, p13.

<sup>33</sup> Dostoyevsky. *The Novel of Discord*, pp10 and 127.

the apprehension that, as Raskolnikov rather grumpily puts it, "if you drag in God's intentions then there is nothing more to be said about it". (p422) The intensity with which Dostoyevsky portrays his doubting heroes, from Raskolnikov right through to Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*, supports this thesis, suggesting an uncommon degree of understanding for, and also considerable enjoyment of, the "furnace of doubt" through which they pass.

Nonetheless, I believe it would be a mistake to then conclude that, because of the obvious importance Dostoyevsky attaches to the "process of discovery", the "discovery itself" is without importance. The abruptness of the ending to the novel suggests a real discomfort with the final laying down of arms associated with conversion, as the author approaches the 'moment of truth' ("That day it seemed to him that the convicts who had been his enemies looked at him differently; he had even begun to talk to them himself, and they replied to him in a very friendly way. He remembered that now, but then it was all as it should be: for was not everything going to be different now?") (p558) and then draws back onto a more nebulous terrain of hints and promises ("But that is the beginning of a new story, the story of the gradual rebirth of a man, the story of his gradual regeneration, of his gradual passing from one world into another [...]"). (p559) At the same time, the determination to keep such an end in view, on the part of Raskolnikov as well as his author, gives the strategies of avoidance in the novel an inescapable sense of purpose, creating the impression of a circling round a common centre rather than a pursuit of endlessly receding horizons of meaning. Razumikhin puts into words the quality of purposeful chaos which characterizes the narrative when he suggests that:

People who tell lies can always be forgiven. There's nothing wrong about a lie, for it leads to the truth. No, what makes me so wild is not that they talk a lot of nonsense, but that they are full of admiration for their own nonsense.

I like people to talk rot. It's man's only privilege over the rest of creation. By talking rot, you eventually get to the truth. I'm a man because I talk rot. [...] Talk rot by all means, but do it in your own way, and I'll be ready to kiss you for it. For to talk nonsense in your own way is a damn sight better than talking sense in someone else's; in the first case, you're a man; in the second, you're nothing but a magpie! Truth won't run away, but life can easily be boarded up. (pp153 and 219)

Here, then, is the anxiety that life should not be "boarded up", and that creative eccentricities should not be bullied into shape by formulae or suppressed in favour of the "magpie" repetition of socially acceptable (or religious) platitudes. But, at the same time, the irrepressible delight in "talking rot" is connected to "getting to the truth". Not

a clearly defined truth, in this instance, for Razumikhin is extremely vague on the subject, but a truth that is related to an attitude of mind that is impatient, not merely of limits in general, but of its own limits in particular. The preferred movement of consciousness is thus outwards, and away from underground sophistry and the imperatives of the will to power.

Razumikhin's point is confirmed in the Epilogue to the novel, where, in Raskolnikov's dream, society is reduced to anarchy by "spirits endowed with reason and will" which possess people and send them mad with the illusory belief that "the truth resided only in [them]". Unable to agree on anything they kill each other "in a kind of senseless fury". (p555) In the midst of this burgeoning and terrible polyphony the ordinary business of living is neglected:

The most ordinary trades were abandoned because everyone was propounding his own theories, offering his own solutions, and they could not agree; they gave up tilling the ground [...]. (p555)

Creativity and doubt which have become an end in themselves are thus judged in the Epilogue in the light of the imperatives of community and of the relationship with the other which are the basis of the faith towards which Dostoyevsky is leading his reluctant hero. The process that has lost all connection with a goal is represented as being destructive to individual potential as is the passive acceptance of definition associated with the 'death' of the creative drive.

Dostoyevsky forces readers of *Crime and Punishment* into a corner. The consequences of active decision lead relentlessly to the imperatives of faith or to the tyrannies of a solitary fantasy world. Yet the middle ground between these two extremes is equally unsatisfactory, being represented in the novel not by the tranquil wise man but by the destructive cynic Svidrigaylov. Svidrigaylov's scepticism has led to a form of moral and psychic inertia that is the ultimate condemnation for Dostoyevsky, if lethargy is indeed the "cardinal sin" in his world<sup>34</sup> (note Svidrigaylov's apathetic voyeurism, p479, and the comparison of his face to a mask, p515). It has deprived him of his enjoyment of life: "I find it frightfully boring sometimes", and although he confesses to Raskolnikov, "I did hope you'd tell me something new", (p481) it is clear he does not want to hear anything "new", for fear this would disturb his lethargic detachment (The "horrible thing" about

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<sup>34</sup> As both Jackson and Jones attest, see *The Art of Dostoevsky: Deliriums and Nocturnes*, p342 (the "cardinal sin in Dostoevsky's world is inertia"), and *Dostoyevsky. The Novel of Discord*, p47 ("lukewarmness [...] is an even worse spiritual malady than the most intense experience of cosmic darkness").

the beauty a man encounters on his travels, says Svidirgaylov, "is that it really makes you yearn for something"). (p301) There is no alternative, it would seem, but to "carry on with the fight", as Raskolnikov puts it, even though the fight will look suspiciously like a wild beating of the air if we do not accept the terms of Dostoyevsky's tentatively offered resolution.

### *The Brothers Karamazov*

#### III. i. Prevarication for effect

The prevarication of Raskolnikov in his jousting with Porfiry, his fear of anything "definite" and determination not to be confined by anyone else's narrative, is extended and modified in *The Brothers Karamazov*. The sense of momentum and of impatience with formulae that runs through Dostoyevsky's oeuvre is sustained in this last novel, and yet, at the same time, it is articulated more clearly than previously in relation to the "supra-natural challenging goal" of faith.

This is not to say that the characters are deprived of their inconsistencies or of their love of equivocation. Nor have they been made to relinquish their power of self-definition. Mitya, for example, shows his determination to avoid being finalized by his actions, or by other people's interpretation of his actions, when he keeps back half the three thousand roubles he stole from Katya, deferring expenditure of the sum until the last moment by which time he has 'decided' to take his own life. As he later explains to the court:

I kept saying to myself [...]: 'No, Dmitry, you may not be a thief as yet. Why not? Because next day you may go and give back the fifteen hundred to Katya.' And it was only yesterday [...] that I made up my mind to tear my amulet off my neck [...] as soon as I tore it off, at that very moment, I became definitely and finally a thief [...]. (p580)

The insistence here on the individual's freedom to change and to choose (Mitya 'becomes' a thief at the moment determined by himself) is unmistakable.

Similarly, Mitya's implied author has not abandoned his comparable delight in the excitement of possibilities, nor his preference for this excitement over the bland certitudes that admit of no discussion, no hypothesis, no creative reformulation. Dostoyevsky's love of argumentation, and of artistic flourishing, approaches the nervous mannerism of someone incapable of keeping mentally still, even in this more

ideologically conservative of novels. He is like the debater who doggedly pursues an idea after he has lost interest in it and long after he has begun to be convinced by the reasoning of the other party. The inability to resist those little extra touches that have little to do with one's central idea is nicely illustrated, in *mise-en-abyme* fashion, in one of the many anecdotes that branch off the main narrative. The anecdote in question concerns the "tradesman in our town" who threw a party. Finding he could not obtain any more vodka, the man grew angry but, once having begun to express his rage, found he was unable to resist the temptation of taking it further to the point where he started to gratuitously to "smash up his own crockery, to tear up his own and his wife's clothes, and finally, to break his windows, and all for the sheer beauty of it". (p115) Apart from being a fine example of the childish wilfulness that typifies some of Dostoyevsky's characters, this is also an illustration of the way an idea can be extended and distorted beyond any obvious meaningfulness in the interests of achieving a desired effect. There is always something of this gleeful tinkering in Dostoyevsky. It should not, however, distract us from the consolidation of his main themes in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

## II. ii. The "feeling of a condition to get to": the will to believe

Dostoyevsky's main theme in the novel is, according to his own foreshadowing in a letter, "one that has tormented me, consciously and unconsciously, all my life long: it is the question of the existence of God".<sup>35</sup> *The Brothers Karamazov* does not attempt a formulation of irrefutable proof for this thesis, and it is the narrative's implicit recognition of the impossibility of doing so (or, alternatively, of providing evidence to the contrary) which gives it an assurance earlier works lack. The challenge of Ivan concerning the appalling horrors that have devastated the innocent as well as the guilty in human history ("[The tears of that tortured little girl] must be expiated, for otherwise there can be no harmony. But how, how are you to expiate them? [...] Not, surely, by their being avenged? But what do I want them avenged for? What do I want a hell for torturers for? What good can hell do if they have already been tortured to death? And what sort of harmony is it, if there is a hell? I want to forgive. I want to embrace. I don't want any more suffering"), (p287) is allowed to stand. It is met with Alyosha's reminder of the sacrificial sufferings of Christ, the one being who "could or had the right to forgive" (p288) but it's protest is not mitigated or rationalized into an acceptable form. Allowing such problems to retain their resonance, Dostoyevsky turns his attention instead to the question of faith that adds to their trouble the additional note of an incongruity. And, rather than deny the incongruity, Dostoyevsky shifts his ground to

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<sup>35</sup> *Letters of Fyodor Michailovitch Dostoevsky to his Family and Friends*, p190.

consider the role played by active love and willing assent in generating and sustaining that faith despite inadequate, or contradictory, evidence.

The relationship between belief and a commitment to active love is a significant one in the novel. At the heart of Alyosha's faith, for example, is a deep affection and respect for Zossima, the elder, and it is this love that is resurrected in the dream he has about the miracle at Cana, creating a groundswell of affirmation that mitigates the intellectual confusion he suffers after the elder's death. The love that has hitherto been concentrated almost exclusively on the old man is regenerated and extended to his brothers, to Grushenka and to the earth that he embraces with tears on waking from the dream. ("It was as though the threads from all those innumerable worlds of God met all at once in his soul [...] He wanted to forgive everyone and for everything, and to beg forgiveness [...] with every moment he felt clearly and almost palpably that something firm and immovable, like the firmament itself, was entering his soul".) (p427) Alyosha's emotional experience of love is qualified by the emphasis on practical charity elsewhere in the novel. Zossima's response to the deadlock created by the equilibrium of (absent) evidence for and against the existence of God is to emphasize the importance of active compassion in transcending intellectual uncertainties. The existence of God and immortality of the soul are, Zossima agrees with Ivan, things "one cannot prove. One can be convinced of [them] though [...] By the experience of active love". (p61) In other words, testing the imperatives of faith experientially is a way of discovering their 'meaning'. Active love is certainly needed to prevent Ivan's compassion and desire to "embrace" and "forgive" mankind from being an intellectual pose. Significantly, Ivan prefaces his exposition on suffering with the admission that he finds the sufferings and anxieties of his immediate neighbours unsympathetic and uninteresting.

As well as reflecting a biblical principle,<sup>36</sup> Dostoyevsky's stress on the role of action in affirming value despite intellectual reservations recalls the ancient sceptic recognition that action involves the thinker in a form of assent his intellectual judgment may disallow. Discussing Arcesilaus and the Stoic conception of action in relation to personal judgement, Gisela Striker emphasizes that as it is "logically impossible to act voluntarily without assent", the sceptic, strictly speaking, is abandoning "his theoretical attitude of suspension of judgement" with every action.<sup>37</sup> Without accepting

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<sup>36</sup> See in particular 1 John 4:20: "If anyone says 'I love God', yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen". This particular epistle is devoted to the interrelationship of faith and love Dostoyevsky explores in *The Brothers Karamazov*. cf my footnote on this in Chapter 2, p73.

<sup>37</sup> *Doubt and Dogmatism*, pp67-68.

this logic at face value (Svidrigaylov's acts of charity in *Crime and Punishment* are voluntarily undertaken, but they are evidence of perversity, not expressions of the "active love" that affirms value), Dostoyevsky nonetheless shows the intellectual aspect of belief to be only one part of a more complex set of human needs and responses. Scepticism is qualified by one's involvement with other human beings, on other than rational, academic levels.

A second method of approach to the problem of belief in the novel is developed in references to the will. As in *Crime and Punishment*, volition is made the cornerstone of that which it also denies. In Ivan's legend, for example, Christ is represented as having "hungered for a faith based on free will", (p300) and of having rejected, therefore, the lure of miracle, (300) mystery (301) and authority, (302 and 304) as a means of winning people to himself. The Church, by contrast, is represented as having used these things to enslave people, relieving them of their burdensome gift of freedom: "The most tormenting secrets of their conscience", the Grand Inquisitor explains to the silent Christ, "they will bring to us, and we shall give them our decision for it all, and they will be glad to believe in our decision, because it will relieve them of their great anxiety and of their present terrible torments of coming to a free decision themselves". (p304) By contrast, the example of doubting Thomas is referred to as someone who, when confronted with a miracle, believed not under compulsion but because of a willing attitude of heart: indeed it is recounted in the gospel accounts of this story that in the presence of the same miraculous presence of Christ, "some believed while others doubted", suggesting that no evidence is sufficient to eradicate the need for individual response and assessment. One of the implications Dostoyevsky seems to draw from the story of Thomas is that not only is faith dependent on free choice in the absence of indisputable proof, but that even were such proof available it would be insufficient to convince. As the devil says to Ivan, repeating the substance of Ivan's own legend: "What's the good of believing against your will? Besides, so far as faith is concerned, no proofs are of any help, particularly material proofs. Thomas believed, not because he saw that Christ had risen, but because he wanted to believe before that". (p748)

This notion of a willing embrace, independent of intellectual hesitations, is of paramount importance in appreciating Dostoyevsky's own symbol of faith, and helps to explain its enduring relevance in his writing despite the spirited sabotage to which it is subjected. Describing his "creed", as the unsurpassed perfection of Christ, Dostoyevsky goes on to stipulate that "If anyone could prove to me that Christ is outside the truth, and if the truth really did exclude Christ, I should prefer to stay with Christ and not with

truth".<sup>38</sup> Will and emotion are thus united in an affirmation of something that is logically undemonstrable as Dostoyevsky, both in the formulation of his credo and in the particular emphasis in his last novel, bears out the validity of Hume's celebrated challenge to the sceptical position. As Burnyeat paraphrases and amplifies this challenge:

when a belief or a practice is genuinely based on reasons, it is given up if those reasons are invalidated. Since we do not give up the inferences and the beliefs in the face of overwhelming sceptical objections, there must be other factors at work in our nature than reason — notably custom and imagination — and it is to these, rather than to man's much-vaunted rationality, that the beliefs and inferences are due.<sup>39</sup>

Faith, then, is sustained by impulses other than rational ones in Dostoyevsky's novel and is, for this reason, seen to be no more exclusive of intellectual uncertainties than intellectual uncertainties are exclusive of faith. But what is the point of doubt in such a context? It would appear that, in this case, Dostoyevsky is imitating the sceptic who, by "[adhering] strictly to appearance", is also "withdrawing to the safety of a position not open to challenge or enquiry".<sup>40</sup>

This, in the end, is an unanswerable criticism, if only because the precise relation in a writer's thinking of doubt and faith, negation and affirmation is impossible to gauge with accuracy. It certainly appears that doubt plays a vital role in Dostoyevsky's thought right up until the last, suggesting, at the very least, that it is a spur to the constant reformulation of the writer's preconceptions in relation to the "challenging goal" of faith. Since neither the characters nor their implied author ever seem to have that serenity of mind which distinguishes the Pyrrhonian sceptic, their hold on the vision of faith would appear to be too tenuous, and too eager, for doubt to have lost its power. Hence Mitya can still say, "God torments me. [...] What if he doesn't exist? What if Rakitin is right that it's a fiction created by mankind", (p695) admitting the possibility both of error and of a total misconception of what the ultimate "philosopher's stone" is like. What can, with justice, still be said of this last novel is that the quality and effect of doubt seems to have undergone a modification. Rather than the psychotic kind of doubt which aims at defying the "trope" of death in the manner of Foucault, doubt is associated in *The Brothers Karamazov* with a sense of impatient urgency and purpose.

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<sup>38</sup> *Letters of Fyodor Michailovitch Dostoevsky to his Family and Friends*, p71.

<sup>39</sup> *Doubt and Dogmatism*, p21.

<sup>40</sup> p36.



Richard Peace refers to this urgency when he discusses Dostoyevsky's relativistic tendencies, suggesting that for all their apparent pluralism, "the overriding impression created by [Dostoyevsky's] novels is certainly not neutrality, it is rather that of a passionate and ill-contained urgency [...]"<sup>41</sup> It is this phenomenon which I identified, in embryonic form, in *Crime and Punishment*, and which I now wish to consider, in its maturer expression, in *The Brothers Karamazov*. It is noteworthy that all three brothers are possessed with a sense of urgency that comes through in their impassioned response to the natural world and in the forward momentum of their thinking which, as a result, is also charged with emotional energy. Alyosha works through the "violent shock" of doubts that arise after he has seen the corrupting body of the elder, with a burning indignation and eagerness ("why should this indignity have happened, why should this disgrace have been permitted, [...] Where was Providence [...]? Why did it hide its finger at the most critical moment [...]?", p398, and, "I did believe, I do believe, and I want to believe!", p480), and Zossima has earlier noticed a thirst for understanding in the atheist Ivan ("You have not made up your mind what answer to give to that question and therein lies your great grief, for the question urgently demands an answer"). (p78) The violence that often characterizes Mitya's physical reactions enters into his subconscious questioning also. In a dream he sees an emaciated peasant woman holding a crying baby and is so shaken he starts shouting at the driver:

'Why are people poor? Why's the babby poor? Why's the steppe so bare? Why don't they embrace and kiss one another? Why don't they sing joyous songs? Why are they so black with misfortune? Why don't they feed the babby?'  
And he felt that, though he was asking wild and senseless questions, he could not help asking them and that, indeed, that was the way they had to be asked.  
(p596)

This is not the tranquil inquiry of the sceptic who is "neutrally disposed, without belief".<sup>42</sup> It bespeaks the urgency of thinkers striving towards a goal rather than everlastingly circling around it for fear of the limitations it might impose. The author seems to share in the urgency of his characters in this regard as a comparable attitude comes out in comments made in Dostoyevsky's notes and letters. "What terrible torments has this thirst to believe cost me and does still cost me, becoming the stronger in my soul, the more there is in me of contrary reasonings", Dostoyevsky writes in the same letter in which he described his symbol of faith.<sup>43</sup> This is the same desire to attain and

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<sup>41</sup> Dostoyevsky. *An Examination of the Major Novels*, p301.

<sup>42</sup> *Doubt and Dogmatism*, p30.

<sup>43</sup> The translation here is taken from the English edition of Mochulsky. (*Dostoevsky. His Life and Work*)

comprehend found in the three brothers, and which doubt serves only to intensify rather than abate.

In a letter to Ivan Aksakov, Dostoyevsky writes: "I often realize with pain that I have literally failed to express one-twentieth part of what I had wanted to [...] The thing that comforts me is the constant hope that one day God will grant me so much inspiration [...] that I shall be able to express myself more fully [...]".<sup>44</sup> A sense of restless striving and dissatisfaction characterizes Dostoyevsky's prose on the aesthetic as well as the ideological level. This helps explain why, even in *The Brothers Karamazov*, there is little of that quiet fatigue of spirits described by Pascal, for instance, where the thinker, wearied in his search for truth, "[tend] les bras au libérateur".<sup>45</sup> The overwhelming length of the work further testifies to a continuing sense of a goal that is always ahead, always just out of reach, as the writer presses on to lay hold of that which has laid hold of him in a series of re-workings and re-presentations.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, then, the strong movement away from 'truth' and 'authority' in *Crime and Punishment* is subject to a reversal. Binswanger's notion of the dialectic of rest and restlessness, of tranquillity anxiously sought after, is helpful in throwing the pattern of this movement into sharper relief. The artistic consciousness, as de Man paraphrases, is perceived by Binswanger in relation to the concept of "der Bedrängte", which "combines an idea of being locked up in too narrow a space, with the temporal ordeal of being steadily urged on, of being unable to rest".<sup>46</sup> Binswanger thus provides a possible rephrasing of the Nietzschean idea of the double movement involved in volition, of a desire to get away from the restrictions of fixed laws and destinies, and of a desire to get to, to reach forward and strive after, the accomplishment of one's creative idea. Binswanger combines the idea of a near-claustrophobic limitation with an urgent desire to break away in a search for a more spacious and extending form of self-expression. Both Pascal and Baudelaire are cited by de Man as writers who reflect Binswanger's image of the driven thinker who, like Baudelaire's man, "Pour trouver le repos court toujours comme un fou!". In its attempt to transcend its own febrile activity, Dostoyevsky's creative drive offers a similar paradoxical image of a peace that must be pursued to be attained, striven after, to be enjoyed.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Cited in Magarshack's introduction to the novel, pxix.

<sup>45</sup> *Pensées* no. 422, p185.

<sup>46</sup> *Blindness and Insight*, p45.

<sup>47</sup> cf also Psalm 34:14 and the recommendation to "seek peace and pursue it"; an image of combined rest and motion which is echoed in the epistle to the Hebrews, "Strive, therefore, to enter that rest".

Restlessness in Dostoyevsky thus finally contradicts itself. And where images of authoritative truth are associated in *Crime and Punishment* with ideas of "being locked up in too narrow a space", to use de Man's phrase, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, truth is the goad that spurs the thinker on to transcend limitation, and, especially, to transcend the limitations associated with his own sophistry.

### III. iii. 'I' and the 'other': the beginnings of a quest

This brings the argument back to the question of the other raised in Chapter 3. For it is the sense of expectancy in relation to an other — whether human or divine — that is the chief distinguishing mark of Dostoyevsky's scepticism in relation to Robbe-Grillet's, exposing a different attitude to writing from the one put forward by Foucault. "La dernière démarche de la raison", writes Pascal, "est de reconnaître qu'il y a une infinité de choses qui la surpassent [...]"<sup>48</sup> Openness to the other, and to that which surpasses and transcends the self's mastery, enables Dostoyevsky's characters and perhaps Dostoyevsky himself to "turn their profession of ignorance against itself" and continue to inquire and affirm in the face of their own doubts.<sup>49</sup> The 'true' meaning of the other is unknowable but space is left in which that other — the "sticky leaves of spring"; the love between Mitya and Grushenka, the humility of Christ — may make its impact on the consciousness. This is one interpretation of the silence of Christ in Ivan's legend, namely, as a gap the author does not wish to close, and a silence in which a person may be registered rather than an abstract creed recited. This mode of waiting on the other is also the crowning expression of the will for Dostoyevsky, something Nietzsche lays the groundwork for when he comments that: "Learning to *see* [...] is almost what, unphilosophically speaking, is called a strong will: the essential feature is precisely *not* to 'will' — to be *able* to suspend decision".<sup>50</sup> 'Seeing' the other in Dostoyevsky demands just such a suspension, or bracketing, of the self's preconceived doubts and judgements.

The question is asked, however, whether the two poles implicit in the double movement of the will may not, after all, be only projections of the subjective imagination. It is certainly significant that, as in *The Idiot*, Dostoyevsky uses dream-scenarios to represent the extremes of good and evil — Christ and the miracle at Cana in Alyosha's dream, the shabby and cynical devil of Ivan's nightmare — and that he has Ivan's devil ask the question underlying the whole orientation towards the other in Dostoyevsky:

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<sup>48</sup> *Pensées*, no.247, p132.

<sup>49</sup> *Doubt and Dogmatism*, p10.

<sup>50</sup> From *The Twilight of the Idols*. Cited in *The Art of Dostoevsky: Deliriums and Nocturnes*, p44.

As for everything else around me, all these worlds, God and even Satan himself — all that hasn't been proved to me. Does it all exist of itself or is it only an emanation of myself, a logical development of my I, [...]. (p756)

This, essentially, is Ivan's dilemma, and the dilemma also of the Greek sceptics who concluded that, given the impossibility of knowing things as they really are, any "statements which seek to go beyond the experience of individuals" must be repudiated.<sup>51</sup> For Dostoyevsky, however, the refusal to wrestle with and attempt to transcend the limits of one's experience as an individual is the most stultifying strategy imaginable, intellectually as well as spiritually. Hence the importance attributed in Dostoyevsky's faith to personal relationships rather than logical certainties.<sup>52</sup>

To accept the responsibility involved in personal relationships and the notion, therefore, that 'my' freedom must be held in tension with 'yours' means to accept, as well as to reach beyond, a limitation. Dostoyevsky's choice of epigraph for *The Brothers Karamazov* is significant in this regard: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit". The quotation encapsulates the ambivalence in the movement towards and away from the other in Dostoyevsky's drama of faith. To subjugate one's narrative to another's is to court 'death'. Yet without 'death', in this scheme of things, there is no regeneration. The incorporation of the death-motif in Dostoyevsky's last novel marks his departure from the thinking of Foucault with which we began the chapter, and according to which the "black wall" of death must not be traversed so much as rendered impotent through the infinite self-reflections of language:

[...] to stop this death which would stop it, [language] possesses but a single power: that of giving birth to its own image in a play of mirrors that has no limits.<sup>53</sup>

In his refusal to relinquish the "tormenting" questions of faith, Dostoyevsky seems to solicit, albeit fearfully, the very limitations Foucault would deflect through writing's "play of mirrors", as if, like the poet, Dostoyevsky hopes that in this ultimate confinement there may yet be freedom.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> A.A. Long's terms in a discussion of the philosophy of Protagoras in *Hellenistic Philosophy*, p79.

<sup>52</sup> cf Father Kallistos Ware's comments on the priorities of faith in *The Orthodox Way*, p19.

<sup>53</sup> *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, p54.

<sup>54</sup> "Take me to you, imprison me, for I  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me." (John Donne's 'Divine Meditations, no. 14)

#### IV. i. The gaze and the quest for power

In Robbe-Grillet's novels the "will to power" implicit in the organizing impulses of the artist are strongly in evidence. There is no attempt to address possible ethical implications of the process of imprinting one's values on the "process of becoming", as there is in Dostoyevsky. The question of order is, as far as possible, an aesthetic one. This brings Robbe-Grillet's preoccupations closer to Nietzsche's. Indeed, there are passages in the fictional autobiography, *Angélique ou l'enchantement*, which mirror the tone and import of Nietzsche's *Will to Power*, and this is nowhere more evident than in the memoirs being written by Henri de Corinthe, Robbe-Grillet's autobiographical phantom and alter-ego. Nietzsche defines our "love of the beautiful" in the *Will to Power* as admiration for "our shaping will":

The two senses stand side-by-side; the sense for the real is the means of acquiring the power to shape things according to our wish. The joy in shaping and reshaping — a primeval joy. We can comprehend only a world that we ourselves have made.<sup>55</sup>

Likewise, Henri de Corinthe writes of the pleasure of the artist in contemplating his own invented forms, his own image, in the world of illusion he has made:

L'artiste, en effet, au sein même du travail créateur qui le constitue comme tel, prend sans cesse conscience de son moi propre (singulier, monstrueux, solitaire) comme constituant l'unique origine possible du sens, c'est-à-dire non seulement comme incomparable source créatrice de sens, mais à la limite comme unique source pensante. (p36)

*La maison de rendez-vous*, with its technical exhibitionism, accords well with this Nietzschean pattern. In the earlier novel, *La jalousie*, however, the narrator-hero is less confident of his "power to shape things according to [his] wish", having not yet fully withdrawn into the world of "beautiful illusion" because he is still attempting to impose his "being" on the external world of an exotic environment and an elusive woman, A... .

In the opening phrase of *La jalousie*, Robbe-Grillet once observed, there is already manifest "a voluntary concern on the part of someone, a narrator, who wishes to organize the world at a glance [...]"<sup>56</sup> As this remark attests, much of the fascination of visual

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<sup>55</sup> *The Will to Power*, p272.

<sup>56</sup> 'Order and Disorder', p9.

detail in a Robbe-Grillet novel derives from what it reveals about the creative intelligence observing it. An earlier theoretical analysis of the importance of the gaze in freeing the world from its entrapment in the vocabulary of tragic humanism thus seems wilfully misleading:

Le regard apparaît aussitôt dans cette perspective comme le sens privilégié, et particulièrement le regard appliqué aux contours (plus qu'aux couleurs, aux éclats, ou aux transparences). La description optique est en effet celle qui opère le plus aisément la fixation des distances ; le regard, s'il veut rester simple regard, laisse les choses à leur place respective.<sup>57</sup>

In the light of different critical commentaries on the function of the gaze in writing and some of the author's own remarks on his novels, the notion of a "simple regard" defended here is highly ironic. According to feminist and marxist readings, for example, the gaze is indeed a "sens privilégié" employed not only to 'fix' distances but to impose them, and, in so doing, to annihilate difference and reinstate a more virulent form of anthropomorphism than even tragic humanism achieves. For Anne-Marie Dardigna, the gaze in the erotic novel (a genre to which *La jalousie* ostensibly belongs) is usually a means of limiting and controlling the feminine other, while for Jacques Leenhardt, it represents an imperialist attempt at mastering a foreign environment, or, to use Robbe-Grillet's own words, at "organiz[ing] the world at a glance". What is significant is that in both these accounts the gaze in Robbe-Grillet is associated with the desire to impose one's personal mode of "Being" on the world of becoming, which I, in turn, have associated with Nietzsche's will to power.

The terms of Dardigna's definition of the phenomenon of erotomania confirms the role played by the intelligence and the will in the subject's perception. In her view, erotomania is to be distinguished from a spontaneous, instinctual expression of sensuality. Erotics, she argues, presupposes "une activité de l'intelligence, de la volonté, appliquée aux choses du corps; elle refuse l'abandon à une sensualité spontanée et irréfléchie".<sup>58</sup> The attitude to sexual difference it entails is thus revealed as the product of a particular way of looking at the world (a "représentation symbolique de toute action sur le monde") that is characterized by an insistent need for order and symmetry (of the subject's devizing) and for keeping things "à leur place respective". The impulse to control Dardignas insists is endemic to erotomania is easily discernible in the narrator's obsession with the whereabouts of A... in and around the plantation. While her physical attractiveness

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<sup>57</sup> Pour un nouveau roman, p65.

<sup>58</sup> Les châteaux d'éros ou les infortunes du sexe des femmes, p76. Robbe-Grillet is one of the writers to be mentioned in the work.

makes her a likely object of desire, recognition of her allure is so hemmed about with calculations and measurements that a sense of intense confinement is created, disallowing the expression of a more spontaneous pleasure and so confirming Dardigna's thesis. A... 's exact placement within the narrator's field of vision is a matter of concern immediately she enters the scene and it is noted, very precisely, that she may be observed from "ce coin de terrasse" where the narrator himself is presumably situated. His gaze pursues her to her room, onto the terrace, into the courtyard, and when he is forced to physically withdraw on an errand to fetch ice for drinks he is still unable to mentally release her, doubling back, en route, through the office, where he can peep through the blinds and spy out a portion of her hair. (pp48-52) The opposite of the traditional cliché, 'out of sight, out of mind', is therefore true in the narrator's case, as in A... 's absence he resorts to mental reconstructions and rationalizations of her behaviour in the attempt to keep her in her "place respective".

Like Dardigna, Leenhardt sees the quest for domination in the novel as reflecting a certain mentality associated with Western rationalism, although he foregrounds the socio-ideological implications of the attitude rather than its sexual motivation.<sup>59</sup> Robbe-Grillet has rejected the imposition of a socio-ideological grid on this, or any other of his novels, but Leenhardt's comments on the gaze are convincing in their account of the obsession for order in the narrative to which Robbe-Grillet himself has drawn attention. For Leenhardt, the narrative reflects the crisis of the Western imperialist faced with the gradual disintegration of his colonial conquests. The inclination to "mesurer, cerner, décrire" is thus translated as the colonizing impulse to domesticate what is foreign. Sight and the reason both assist in the process of "la maîtrise de la terre" by extracting different elements from their original context and dividing them up, with the land itself, into more familiar and manageable fragments. While the narrator's mental cataloguing does not immediately suggest a colonial crisis it does at least betray a strong desire to render the environment intelligible through a series of spatial and temporal measurements. The enumeration of banana trees confirms this, as does the hypothetical tabulating of "la position et les déplacements respectifs" of wild animals moving around outside the house, and the retelling and interpreting of the centipede incident, which is caught up in the narrator's jealous suspicions about A... .

The leitmotif of the centipede, however, and the manner of its representation shows how the novel effects its own subversion and undermines the "will to power" implicit in the principle narrative voice. It did not need the later confirmation from the author to

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<sup>59</sup> cf earlier comments on Leenhardt's analysis of *La jalousie* in my Chapter 1, p44.

expose the very deliberate undermining by the narrative of its own ordering processes both through the direct challenge represented by A... and the native environment — organizers, as Robbe-Grillet phrases it, “of disorder, that is of another order which attempts to penetrate the text” — <sup>60</sup> and, indirectly, through a continual metamorphosis throughout the narrative of order into disorder, and vice versa. There is a sense, for example, in which the precise calculations indicative of “une activité de l’intelligence, de la volonté” are contrasted with A...’s more spontaneous sensuality and imagination, as revealed in her instinctive rapport with the natives, and her enjoyment of fanciful literature. At the same time, however, these contrasting patterns of order and disorder show their propensity to become their opposite, as, following the Derridean pattern of ‘différance’, one term proves to be the other differed. The narrator’s concern for detail, for example, betrays a mounting hysteria when he calculates that ten centimetres separate A... and Franck’s hands as they sit together on the terrace. And the centipede that is so minutely observed grows from a largish insect to a monstrosity the size of a plate because of its association in the narrator’s mind with A...’s infidelity. A...’s ‘disorder’, on the other hand, reflects the competence and mastery that eludes her observer. She is presented as self-possessed and serene, completely at ease in a tropical climate, a dominant party in both domestic and more intimate relationships. Her voice giving orders to the cook is “nette” and “mesurée”; (p16) the orange trees in the grounds have been planted at her advice; (p38) the railings are to be painted in the colour of her choice: a vibrant yellow. (p40)

Perhaps the most ironic reversal so far as the erotic “will to power” is concerned, is that the narrator’s attempts to gain control over A... deprive him of his own freedom of thought so that, as a result of his obsession, A... ends up controlling him. It is perhaps inappropriate, therefore, to speak of control in connection with the narrator at all except, as was the case with Raskolnikov, in terms of his own fantasy world in which he imagines an inferno of retribution for the lovers. Even the mode of the gaze that is principally employed in the narrative — namely, the one-way vision created by looking through venetian blinds — indicates a vulnerability, as the narrator seeks to avoid being exposed to the gaze of those he watches.

#### IV. ii. Doubt and “shaping things according to our wish”

All of Robbe-Grillet’s early novels, in fact, represent this fundamental dichotomy between uncertainty and a frantic attempt to maintain control. In the previous chapter I

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<sup>60</sup> ‘Order and Disorder’, p9.



looked at the element of psychotic insecurity in this, and how this was then regulated through a foregrounding of aesthetic form. In the present analysis of *La jalousie*, however, I wish to attempt a redefinition of uncertainty from the point of view of its complicity with the creative drive. Or, to put this another way, I wish to isolate the point at which uncertainty ceases to reflect doubt, or an uncontrollable anxiety, and expresses instead that manic form of creativity Foucault speculates is our best defence against death, the anxiety “narcissistically intoxicated with itself, an anxiety determined to go on being anxious”.<sup>61</sup>

On one level, narrative uncertainty in *La jalousie* is a response to the unknowability of things due to incomplete data, reflecting a sceptical readiness, therefore, to suspend judgement. Descriptions of A...’s facial expressions are, accordingly, hypothetical and speculative in tone, implicitly acknowledging the opacity of the other’s thoughts and intentions to the inquiring gaze. Her smile could express a variety of sentiments: “le même sourire où se lit, aussi bien, la dérision que la confiance, ou l’absence totale de sentiments”. (p42) This principle of uncertainty is confirmed by certain key terms throughout the narrative as reminders that hesitancy must attend all calculations about the other, since knowledge is partial and understanding inevitably flawed, hence: “sans doute”; “peut-être”; “ou bien”, suggesting a conscious attempt to leave interpretation of phenomena open. A... is glimpsed near a chest of drawers, “tenant sans aucun doute une feuille de papier entre les mains”; (p14) Franck is dimly heard exchanging a few words with A... on the terrace, “un remerciement sans doute”; (p18) while A... hums an indistinct dance tune that Franck recognizes “peut-être” even if the narrator does not. (p29) The venetian blinds and flaws in the glass effect visual distortions and discontinuities on the landscape, the house, and the people being surveyed through them, all adding to the impression of incomplete data, visually, aurally and mentally, that is being analyzed, of necessity, with sceptical caution.

The flaw in all this, of course, is that the mind that sees these things is not sceptically predisposed in the first place, being already possessed by an idea that colours its perception with prejudice and suspicion. What reads as a cautious assessment of the incalculable is soon transformed into the psychotic doubting of jealous suspicion that has already decided what it will find before it starts looking. Minor observations, viewed in the context of this suspicion, begin to appear as ‘evidence’ that A... and Franck are having an affair. It is noted that A... has arranged the chairs on the terrace in such a

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<sup>61</sup> *Agon. Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, p114. Bloom’s discussion of Freud in chapters 4 and 5 are pertinent to Robbe-Grillet’s conception of the artistic will.

way as to permit herself and Franck to sit together, (p19) and that she later asks for the light to be removed, plunging them both into a semi-obscurity Franck describes as "Plus intime, bien sûr". The insertion of a "dit-elle" in A...’s reported reason for this removal, namely, that the lamplight is uncomfortably bright, then reads as an equivalent of a "so she says" and draws attention to the ambivalence of the other 'cautionary' expressions in the text. The gap between inadequate evidence, on the one hand, and hypothetical interpretation, on the other, becomes a vacuum that jealous suspicion rushes into and closes so that partial observations come to be read as direct 'proof' of guilt. The blue letter paper that is seen on A... and Franck’s person becomes likely 'evidence' of private correspondance; the dance tune A... hums and Franck presumably knows becomes 'evidence' of common interests or of time already spent together; the obscured view of A... leaning over Franck’s car after the trip to town becomes 'evidence' of a kiss; A...’s omitting to describe the hotel room where they were forced to spend a night becomes 'evidence' of a shared bed, and so on.

A question presents itself in the mind of the practical reader: why does the narrator not confront A... and end the uncertainty that has grown into a tormenting suspicion? Or, alternatively, why does he not emulate the tranquillity of the Greek sceptic who, faced with scanty evidence, refuses to draw conclusions one way or another and does not distress himself with the reflection that one solution may be more 'true' than another? One of the achievements of Robbe-Grillet's novel is that it shows the difficulties of maintaining this pose of intellectual sang-froid, especially in interpersonal relations, and the reader is allowed to feel that the question of A...’s infidelity matters, and matters intensely (to the narrator), so that incomplete evidence will inevitably be examined with a highly subjective attention. This is a rephrasing of a point made in *The Brothers Karamazov* concerning the role of the will in relation to belief and doubt where, as in the story of doubting Thomas, the predisposition of the thinker influences the way incomplete, or puzzling, evidence is assessed. The final decision is not always a purely rational one. But where Dostoyevsky attempts to transcend self-determined doubts and values, Robbe-Grillet’s narrators, like Raskolnikov, are shown deliberately prolonging their subjective illusions. Indeed, the 'answer' to the narrator’s anxiety in *La jalousie* must never be found for, otherwise, the whole narrative collapses. This is why the narrator’s anxiety is "an anxiety determined to go on being anxious": because the novel would not exist without it. And this is one reason why Jean-Pierre Monnier’s remarks on the paucity of interpersonal dialogue in the New Novel provide an inappropriate assessment of Robbe-Grillet’s writing: "le refus de la rencontre", claims Monnier, "ne peut aboutir à l’institution du dialogue, et, par conséquent, ne peut conduire à l’art du roman

[...]”.<sup>62</sup> In *La jalousie* it is in the absence of direct dialogue that the true ‘artfulness’ of the narrative lies.

The circumstances of the novel and its overall theme are therefore closely linked to its functioning as a work of the imagination. Uncertainty and doubt are aesthetically determined indeterminations which stimulate the creative hypothesizing on which Robbe-Grillet’s narrative depends.

#### *La maison de rendez-vous*

##### V. i. The detour of discontinuity and the Nietzschean movement “away from”

For me, the turning point in my work is *Dans le labyrinthe* where [...] there appears a kind of rupture within the narrative word. *Le Voyeur* and *La Jalousie* are, in fact, strongly centered novels which, in the case of *La Jalousie*, means that whether called ‘husband’ or ‘pure anonymous presence’, there is something which is an organising center of the whole text [...] Starting with *Dans le labyrinthe*, books like *La Maison de rendez-vous* [...] represent a clearer and clearer tendency to refuse that someone take over in the text [...] In *La Maison de rendez-vous*, one might already have the impression — and I think this would be a good reading of the text — that there are numerous narrative forces, one of which is called Johnson, another Lady Ava, a third Edouard Manneret, and there are a lot of others. It is not only characters but also *places* [...] which tell a story, as if each element of the narration tended at each moment to seize the narrative power.<sup>63</sup>

According to the author’s perception of his 1965 work, *La maison de rendez-vous* represents a break away from the strongly centred discourse of the earlier *La jalousie*. Instead of a bid for mastery on the part of a dominant narrative voice which is then challenged by a counter-order there are now numerous voices, or narrative elements, attempting to “seize the narrative power”, and so creating a state of permanent rupture within the text. The body of Robbe-Grillet’s writing published in the 1960’s and 70’s seems to me to bear out the author’s claims about increased narrative instability. In *La maison de rendez-vous*, which I wish to examine as a representative work of the period, there are a greater number of contradictions and changes of perspective, all of which make the novel more difficult to analyze in terms of an individual’s experience of uncertainty than was *La jalousie*, for example.

The frequent recurrence of a “je” narrator in the novel with a consistently similar perspective suggests an anonymous observer or persona of Edouard Manneret (or Ralph

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<sup>62</sup> *L’âge ingrat du roman*, p123.

<sup>63</sup> *Three decades of the French New Novel*, p27.

Johnson), or, alternatively, but not necessarily exclusively, the voice of the novelist recounting a private journal of sexual fantasies, and doubtless answering with pleasure to the description in the text of a "Narrateur peu scrupuleux". Since narrative perspectives shift repeatedly, however, the identity of the principle "je" narrator is remains nebulous, the "I" of the opening being displaced by a gentleman with a florid complexion recounting his travel experiences, who is, in turn, interrupted by a number of images focussing on a young woman and a large black dog. Later the original "je" narrator returns, promising to "essayer maintenant de raconter cette soirée chez Lady Ava", but then being diverted from his task by the sight of scenic groups of sculpted figures, all telling their own story, in Lady Ava's garden. The same narrator fades into the background again when the reader's attention is solicited for the 'narrative' of Kim. This pattern, established in the first 30 or 40 pages, is maintained throughout.

The numerous dislocations in *La maison de rendez-vous* strongly evoke the Nietzschean strategy of evasion preferred by Foucault, but with a difference. In Foucault the frustration of the drive towards unity is carried to the point where there no longer seems to be what Nietzsche calls a "centre of power" organizing the text, whether in the guise of narrator, writer, or writer as narrator. Indeed, a predilection for strategies of avoidance in Foucault is linked to a desire for personal effacement,<sup>64</sup> indicating a refusal of the "total and final responsibility" for one's signifying activities Nietzsche links in *Beyond Good and Evil* with the strong will. In *La maison de rendez-vous*, by contrast, the detours and interruptions which distract attention from any one voice represent a circuitous, but sure, route to a 'centre', namely, the self-reflections of the narrator-author.

#### V. ii. Unity through self-reference: the movement towards a centre

In a 1988 interview Robbe-Grillet drew attention to a paradox in his work which sheds light on the drive towards unity in his 1965 novel:

C'est une contradiction, et j'y suis très sensible. D'une part cette mouvance, cette mobilité [...] et en même temps le vieux rêve de Flaubert de constituer un objet totalement inattaquable: l'esthétique du chef d'œuvre, l'objet fermé sur lui-même, qui ne tient que par sa propre cohérence. Objet ouvert, plein de trous, de contradictions, et objet clos, malgré tout [...] ]<sup>65</sup>

<sup>64</sup> A desire, figuratively speaking, for the obliteration of the face, see *L'archéologie du savoir*, p17: "Plus d'un, comme moi sans doute, écrivent pour n'avoir plus de visage". Note, however, the personal initiative implicit in this. See Bloom's remarks to this effect in *Agon. Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, p48.

<sup>65</sup> 'Conversation avec Alain Robbe-Grillet' with Jean-Jacques Brochier, February, 1988.

The linkage here of instability with a coherent design and purpose perfectly encapsulates the paradox of *La maison de rendez-vous*. What Robbe-Grillet does not consider in the interview is the way aesthetic coherence is directly reliant on the failure, or instability, of more conventionally readable means of unifying the text, in other words, the "objet ouvert" holds the key to the "objet fermé", and conversely.

This may be illustrated with reference to the use of contradictions to create an artificial instability which is then used to draw attention to aesthetic problems with the reader being sometimes referred to the decisions confronting the writer of the scene in question. The flickering representations of Kim climbing up and down the staircase with or without the envelope, tying or not tying up the dog, cohere, therefore, because of the compositional logic that subtends them. In fact the greater the disruption of the unity of mimetical realism, the more acutely conscious does the reader become of the novel's preoccupation with its own processes and its determination, in fact, to create an "objet fermé sur lui-même". Underlining the self-referentiality that unifies the 'disorder' of the text are the number of references to other Robbe-Grillet works, and favorite Robbe-Grillet persona. This gives the novel a monumental extra-textual unity that bears comparison with Balzac's technique of the recurring character in *La comédie humaine*.<sup>66</sup> Leki has traced some of these references: Boris from *Un régicide*; a man in dark glasses walking his dog from *L'immortelle*; a bicycle from *Le voyeur*; to which one might add Marchat from *Les gommes*, and an obsession with ceiling patterns from *Dans le labyrinthe*. Whole passages from *La maison de rendez-vous* will in turn be used, with minor alterations, in *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, published in 1970.<sup>67</sup> The technique by which several characters in the novel are interlinked (see p210) and circuitously related to an author-figure named Manneret (also identified with the "vieux roi fou" with whom Robbe-Grillet and his 'mad' grandfather from *Le miroir qui revient* share an affinity) suggests the ultimate self-referential ploy, namely, the inclusion of the author in his own story, whose unity is then guaranteed through all the characters being related to the author's fictional persona. *La maison de rendez-vous* thus conforms to Foucault's idea of the text as "giving birth to its own image in a play of mirrors that has no limits",<sup>68</sup> but with the writer, rather than the anonymous energy of language, being revealed as the ground of this activity.

<sup>66</sup> Another indication of affinity with a novelist who exemplifies everything Robbe-Grillet dislikes about bourgeois literature.

<sup>67</sup> cf p205 "chacun connaissant désormais son rôle avec exactitude" and p7 of *Projet*, "chacun connaît son rôle par cœur".

<sup>68</sup> *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, p54.

The black wall that is the reverse side of Foucault's mirror — namely, death — seems to have miraculously painted itself out. I have discussed in the previous chapter the way artifice averts the violent and potentially tragic consequences of sado-eroticism in Robbe-Grillet, and subdue the pathos in *Dans le labyrinthe*. In *La maison de rendez-vous* artifice is employed to even greater effect to challenge the notion of finality by representing death, also, as a "figuration rather than a reality", as Bloom phrases it.<sup>69</sup> By frustrating linear time with its irrevocable advance towards decay, by surrounding death with the trappings of the theatre, and by having the characters talk about it and work it into a story, death is caught up in the same game of mirrors as the rest of Robbe-Grillet's novel. Towards the beginning of the narrative a story is told about Edouard Manneret's death, (p46) but, as with the dying prima donna of opera, this is not the last we hear of him. He comes to life and dies several times, and is then fittingly associated with the goddess of illusion. (p85) Similarly, while he, as a writer-figure, is in a special position to manipulate imaginatively the destinies of others, his own death-bed scene is, in turn, organized by another "metteur en scène" who adds contrivances of his own to the corpse so that the scene reflects *his* signification:

Par souci de décoration plus que de vraisemblance, le metteur en scène enlève encore les chaussures du cadavre et les lui remet en les intervertissant: la chaussure droite au pied gauche, et la chaussure gauche au pied droit. (p175)

The "volonté subversive" in *La maison de rendez-vous* is thus clearly represented as a "volonté d'intervention" seeking to impose its order on the world and declining to yield to any established order that might threaten its freedom with finality and silence.

### V. iii. Autobiographical fiction in the light of fictional autobiography

Robbe-Grillet's autobiographical fiction (*Le miroir qui revient, Angélique ou l'enchantement*) is the culmination of all his arguments since *Pour un nouveau roman* about the organizing powers of the writer and the dramatization of his "volonté d'intervention" in the novels. Robbe-Grillet has always been aware of a link between his characters and his own mercurial identity, and between his fiction and the life-experience he remembers and interprets in a highly imaginative way. Hence, after describing childhood fears and phantoms in *Le miroir*, he can turn and address the reader with:

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<sup>69</sup> Agon. *Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, p124.

J'ai l'impression d'avoir raconté tout cela, depuis longtemps, dans mes livres comme dans mes films, et d'une façon beaucoup plus juste, plus convaincante. (p16)

His deliberately outrageous statement in the same work, "Je n'ai jamais parlé d'autre chose que de moi",<sup>70</sup> confirms, for all its provocation, that the sense of unity in such works as *La maison de rendez-vous* derives in large part from its conscious inscription with the author's insignia.

Thirty years prior to *Le miroir* Robbe-Grillet was already taking exception to theories of literature which saw the writer as a mediator of something beyond himself and, by implication, beyond his absolute control. He explains, for example, his distaste for nineteenth-century ideas about the novelist as "une sorte de monstre inconscient", whose work is produced "comme à son insu" and as if at the dictation of "quelque force supérieure". For in that case, Robbe-Grillet insists, "Le romancier, plus qu'un créateur au sens propre, ne serait alors qu'un simple médiateur entre le commun des mortels et une puissance obscure [...]".<sup>71</sup> Years later in *Le miroir qui revient* a similar concern is expressed, only this time it is the structuralist/marxist view of the writer as a depersonalized "avatar local de la lutte des classes", and of his text as the anonymous "travail du scriptor", which Robbe-Grillet feels the need to refute.<sup>72</sup> While continuing to acknowledge the generative power of language, and the interdependence of language with the self it articulates, Robbe-Grillet seeks to reverse what Hartman calls the deconstructive "turn" taken "against the will of the author" which transfers the burden of authorial intention from "une puissance obscure" to the "aphoristic energy" of writing.<sup>73</sup> Robbe-Grillet prefers to assume this responsibility, consciously and explicitly, for himself.

Responding to the depersonalizing of language in recent decades, Harold Bloom, who in many ways assumes a position similar to Robbe-Grillet's, points out that "Personality in any case cannot be voided except by personality",<sup>74</sup> implying that the absence of a controlling idea in relation to authorial intention is an effect, not so much of language, as of the subject manipulating language. This argument refocusses attention on the way contrived disorder in *La maison de rendez-vous* ultimately strengthens the sense of authorial control rather than diminishing it. Similarly, while in his assumption of the autobiographical "skin" Robbe-Grillet metamorphoses many times, succeeding,

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<sup>70</sup> *Le miroir qui revient*, p10.

<sup>71</sup> *Pour un nouveau roman*, pp10-11.

<sup>72</sup> *Le miroir qui revient*, p11.

<sup>73</sup> *Saving the Text*, p7.

<sup>74</sup> Agon. *Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, p48.

therefore, in decapitating the “monstre” of conventional identity, it is still his own reflection we see in the autobiographical glass. This is no accident but consistent, rather, with Robbe-Grillet’s belief in the need to appropriate meaning to serve one’s own ends, and to usurp other identities so they reflect one’s own preoccupations. Hence Robbe-Grillet can write, teasingly yet pointedly: “C’est un autre problème qui se pose, du fait que je parle aussi de moi; ou même: uniquement de moi, comme toujours. Mes parents c’est déjà moi en train de prendre forme”.<sup>75</sup>

Not surprisingly, therefore, Robbe-Grillet interprets the accusations of “imposteur” addressed to Roland Barthes in the course of the Barthes/Picard debate on Racine as a compliment to Barthes, and a sign of his creativity (“il était un imposteur, parce que justement il était un véritable écrivain”).<sup>76</sup> Robbe-Grillet’s own Henri de Corinthe, that arch-impostor and self-styled Nietzschean superman, is represented in *Angélique* in the process of writing a personal manifesto on the need to overturn laws in the expression of the writer’s “volonté subversive”:

Se connaître soi-même comme le plus grand [...] voilà sa raison d’être [...] Car il ne suffit pas de sortir vainqueur d’une partie — même mortelle — dont quelqu’un d’autre aurait fixé les règles (un prince, une assemblée ou un dieu) — le dernier écrivain se mesure d’abord au désir, à la nécessité de devenir l’unique créateur de toute loi écrite.<sup>77</sup>

Thus, where the discontinuity that is a condition of the characters’ being-in-the-world marks the text with the trace of a psychic fragility, the absence willed by the author betrays the will to power that is associated with the artistic illusion.

## VI. Conclusion

Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet’s novels show them both to be passionate sceptics who embrace doubt as a means of eluding both the limitations represented by conventional discourse, and of maintaining their creative élan as writers. Raskolnikov’s attempts to escape the consequences of his action and avoid the finalizing judgements of the law provide the impetus in *Crime and Punishment* which drives the narrative forward to its conclusion. In *La jalousie*, uncertainty is even more crucial as a generating device for the narrative. In both instances doubt appears as a “self-determined indetermination” which is employed to avoid the finality implicit in certain definitions and decisions.

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<sup>75</sup> *Le miroir qui revient* p58.

<sup>76</sup> p63.

<sup>77</sup> p37.



The different manner in which each writer works through what might be termed a psychic and intellectual claustrophobia is increasingly evident in their later novels. In *The Brothers Karamazov* doubt and uncertainty are caught up in the drive towards a goal, as the characters, like their implied author, attempt to lay hold of that which has laid hold of them: a desire for possession which is also, ultimately, a movement of submission to the other. This involves a confrontation with, and an acceptance of, a limitation on their will to power. Robbe-Grillet continues in his novels to refuse the limits implicit in recognition of another's discourse. Nevertheless, it could be argued that, by breaking free of the restrictions implicit in 'bourgeois' ideology and morality in *La maison de rendez-vous*, Robbe-Grillet has simply created another confining space that is equally claustrophobic due to its excessive absorption in its own image. The "primal joy" Nietzsche tells us derives from the "power to shape things according to our wish" is subject to its own ambivalent reversals.

In the final analysis, the hall of mirrors that is Foucault's analogy for the game of writing is more appropriate to Robbe-Grillet than it is to Dostoyevsky. The title of Robbe-Grillet's autobiographical work, *Le miroir qui revient*, suggests an ongoing delight in self-reflection that echoes Nietzsche's delight in the eternal circle:

This world [...] my *Dionysian* world of eternal self-creation and eternal self-destruction, this mystery world of twofold voluptuous delight, my 'beyond good and evil' without goal unless the joy of the circle is a goal [...] do you want a *name* for this world? [...] *This world is the will to power...*<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Cited in *A Study Of Nietzsche*, p119.

## C o n c l u s i o n

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Des trous se déplaçant dans sa texture, c'est grâce à cela que le texte vit, comme un territoire au jeu de go ne reste vivant que si l'on a pris soin d'y ménager au moins un espace libre, une case vacante, ce que les spécialistes appellent un œil ouvert, ou encore une liberté.

(Alain Robbe-Grillet)

### i. A sceptical playground

The novels of Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet exhibit a common delight in and exploitation of uncertainty. Doubt in their narratives is not merely an agent of instability it is also a stimulus that conduces to the kind of intellectual excitement characteristic of the two writers' scepticism. In their relish of the self-defeating aspects of the text's logic, Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet may thus be seen to reject the sense of detachment associated with Pyrrhonian scepticism. Equally, however, their cultivation of the irregular achieves a pathological note at times that is foreign to deconstruction linguistic scepticism. The sense of a misplaced malaise in Robbe-Grillet has less in common with Derrida, therefore, than with Bloom, who writes of the need to cultivate anxiety in the interests of maintaining a self-regulating creative euphoria. Dostoyevsky's scepticism has perhaps a closer affinity with Bakhtin's carnivalism, which has been as important as deconstruction in defining the tenor of contemporary scepticism and in drawing attention to the sceptical potential of past literary practice. Dostoyevsky's experimentation with eccentric ideas, poses and masks in the novels can be read as an almost gluttonous receptivity to heterogeneity, corresponding to carnival extravagance.

The excitement engendered by doubt in both Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet is neither meaningless nor entirely without motive. Although enjoyed for its own sake, uncertainty is as much about a bid for freedom as it is a consequence of Robbe-Grillet's generative "vide" and Dostoyevsky's underground quibbles and "tormenting" questions. Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet strive against the restrictions of institutional legalism in any form and their scepticism reflects a fear of the mental and psychic claustrophobia that is induced by enforced submission to laws, practices and codified ideologies. The difficulty with reactions to external pressure, however, as seen in the attitude of their hero-narrators, is that the attempt to preserve a creative space free of intrusive limits implies some form of withdrawal from the other. This means not only the other of laws and institutions but also the other who is the narrator's equal, and whose freedom at some point must

intersect with and challenge the narrator's own, if freedom is to escape the perversions of monomania.

## ii. A room of our own

Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet's novels show that to some extent withdrawal into "une arrière boutique toute nostre" (Montaigne's phrase for the reflective space needed by the thinker) is a preliminary to creative activity in so far as the mind, cut off from the immediate registering of phenomena, is free to remember, imagine and invent. The notion of a discontinuity between mind and world that is physical as well as mental is fundamental to Robbe-Grillet's aesthetic, and implicit also in the responses of his own and Dostoyevsky's narrators to the world in which they find themselves. The type of fantasizing which Dostoyevsky's underground man enjoys, for example, is largely dependent on his being just that, an underground man released from the norms and exigencies of everyday social behaviour. If he craves external stimulus he is quick to discover that close involvement with others and their narratives impairs his ability to fantasize. Similarly, the brooding speculation in Robbe-Grillet's *La jalousie* is maintained largely because of the narrator's estrangement from A... . In both these instances the whole impetus of the narratives would be lost if any prolonged encounter with the other were to be introduced into the text. There seems, therefore, to be a deliberate equation on the part of the authors of withdrawal and intense imaginative activity.

On the one hand, then, movement away from the other in pursuit of unrestricted freedom of thought stems from an attitude that is consciously sought after by the implied author, and his narrator's solipsism reflects the inherited dilemma of the sceptic in relation to the world. Is it possible, the sceptic of ancient Greece somewhat resignedly asks, to grasp anything beyond the enclosures of the mind, or are the limitations of experience, temperament and cultural conditioning such as to prevent significant gains in understanding? The question is implicit in Pyrrho's bracketing of the external world as a subject of inquiry, as it is in our own age in Derrida's reminder of our dependence on linguistic mediation, thus: "il n'y a pas de hors-texte". Is the room of our own, then, not a creative space after all, but a prison that we can choose neither to leave nor enter?

Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet's response to this dilemma indicates the point where they diverge most significantly as sceptical thinkers.

iii. "Truth to another and his word" and "ce qu'il y a dans ma tête"

When all is uncertain the sceptic may nonetheless prefer certain criteria above others as suitable guides in the exercise of personal judgement: Pyrrho's goal of equanimity; Carneades' degrees of probability; Montaigne's "sound judgement"; all these could be described as principles to which past sceptics have adhered, in their endlessly cautious fashion. The nature of what the sceptic is prepared to concede is likely to be as much the product of the sceptic's mental makeup and experience as are the nature and extent of his/her doubts. The will to affirm something is nonetheless not as hostile to the sceptic disposition as might be supposed by the premiss of unknowability.

What, then, is the preference of the two writers under examination? Is it to be 'truth' to sense-perception? To the intellect or the conventionally reasonable? For Dostoyevsky, as Bakhtin has effectively phrased it, the ultimate criterion is "truth to another person and his word". Fidelity, in other words, not to an idea or a capability but to a person. When Dostoyevsky states that:

If anyone could prove to me that Christ is outside the truth [...] I should prefer to stay with Christ and not with truth

he marks his departure from the rationally-oriented scepticism of a thinker like Montaigne, as well as from the phenomenologically-oriented scepticism of Sextus Empiricus. The 'rational' scepticism of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* is criticized by the implied author because it is without the necessary flexibility to respond to the other. Raskolnikov's feelings of alienation are as much about a self-imposed intellectual limitation as they are about moral guilt, for he has tried to construct an impenetrable theory that nothing could contradict and which would enable him to manipulate experience according to his own "sweet will". The underground man is a recurrent theme in Dostoyevsky's scepticism as is Dostoyevsky's critique of the underground mentality, on the grounds that "the law of the *I*" must merge "with the law of humanism".

Alain Robbe-Grillet's theoretical statements on the other are as contradictory as the behaviour of Dostoyevsky's narrators often is in relation to the stated ideological preferences of their author. Robbe-Grillet has claimed, for instance, that the other consistently defies the perceiver's attempts to contain and manipulate it ("[le monde] refuse de se plier à nos habitudes d'appréhension et à notre ordre"). But, complicating this express recognition of the role of otherness in perception is the obvious preference for invention over inquiry: "ce sont les formes [que l'homme] crée qui peuvent apporter des

significations au monde". While in novels like *La jalousie* tension between the world's otherness and creative perception decentres narrative subjectivity, the bias in Robbe-Grillet's œuvre as a whole tends towards the imposition of meaning rather than inquiry into the *other's* meaning. For one thing, Robbe-Grillet's conception of the other most often concerns a material other that has certain formal properties (the famous *paralèpipèdè*, for example), but which can only act as a neutral reflector of fantasy. In the case of the personal other in the novels, a similar effect is achieved, either through the use of the *femme-objet* figure, or through the other's automatically sharing the dominant narrative fantasy, thus failing more directly to challenge the text's primary vision. Because the other frequently lacks the ability to reverse habits of perception it cannot be said to play an important role in Robbe-Grillet's scepticism as represented in the mentality of his hero-narrators.

It is nonetheless inappropriate to speak of failure in connection with modes of perception in Robbe-Grillet's novels. For the otherness of the world which yields to the narrator's "habitudes d'appréhension" is not the other that Robbe-Grillet is principally interested in. The other that fascinates Robbe-Grillet is refracted in multiple images by the "réel", identified in *Angélique* with his own subconscious world of dreams. In this respect, self-reflection, not inquiry into the other than self, is the chief motivation behind Robbe-Grillet's sceptical inquiries, as is made abundantly clear in his response to queries about contradictory information concerning family members: "en fin de compte il n'y a d'autre chose au monde que ma tête, que ce qu'il y a dans ma tête".<sup>1</sup> Interest in the other is nearly always circular, leading back to the self, and so to a willed and not merely accidental solipsism as Robbe-Grillet demonstrates his agreement with Dostoevsky's underground man: "what can a decent, respectable man talk about with the greatest of pleasure? Answer: himself".<sup>2</sup>

Dostoevsky has also been described as a posturer in front of the glass of self-reflection. Nevertheless, it is clear that, as with his character Mr Golyadkin (*The Double*), he is not happy with all he sees, so that there is an ongoing attempt to remake himself, and his characters, in the face of the other. Robbe-Grillet, in his acceptance of the limits of solipsism, is free from the anguish of this self-questioning, just as his doubt is not a raging protest that demands an answer, however impossible, but a muted and delicately

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<sup>1</sup> 'Conversation avec Alain Robbe-Grillet', p91. cf *Alain Robbe-Grillet. Qui suis-je?* p147: "si je parle de mon grand-père à des gens qui l'ont connu, qu'ils me contredisent sur tel ou tel point, je ne les crois pas. Davantage, ce qu'ils me disent ne m'intéresse pas".

<sup>2</sup> *Notes from Underground*, p17. A rephrasing of Robbe-Grillet's own celebrated remark, "Je n'ai jamais parlé d'autre chose que de moi".

balanced rhetoric of uncertainty. For Robbe-Grillet, as for Nabokov, art is a game, a vitally important one, but a game for all that:

Art is a game, because it remains art only as long as we are allowed to remember that, after all, it is all make-believe, [...] only as long as our feelings of horror or of disgust do not obscure our realization that we are, as readers or spectators, participating in an elaborate and enchanting game [...].<sup>3</sup>

#### iv. Writers in a sceptic tradition?

Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet are alike in their exploitation of uncertainty but they differ in their perception of its function in relation to scepticism.

Dostoyevsky uses uncertainty in a double action to undermine doubt as well as belief so that, in G.K. Chesterton's phrase, doubt "is capable of becoming an uncertainty continually shaken by a tormenting suggestion".<sup>4</sup> The interaction of faith and doubt creates ongoing tensions in the novels that provide, in turn, a rich lode of material for critical disagreement. Doubt is positively conceived in the novels, but it is also subject to criticism in the context of the self/other relation. The most effective and lasting challenge to our preconceived ignorance as well as to our preconceived ideas is, Dostoyevsky seems to imply, our neighbour, and ourselves, too, as we interact with others.

Robbe-Grillet uses uncertainty to subvert conventional meaningfulness as a preliminary to the imposition of private fantasy. Because of the persistent recurrence of one type of fantasy in the novels to the exclusion of others, the gaps and silences in the text may be filled by the implied reader only if s/he shares the narrator's obsessions. No critique of doubt itself is offered in Robbe-Grillet, and in later works, where the pathological atmosphere of *La jalousie* and *Le voyeur* is less in evidence, scepticism is associated with an assured, almost slick technique suggestive of a high degree of philosophic as well as psychological composure.

In the final analysis it would appear there is no single sceptical tradition with which the two writers may be satisfactorily compared. Both depart from the recommendations of Pyrrho in their rejection of tranquillity, although Dostoyevsky could be said to rejoin ancient scepticism in his emphasis on the ethical, rather than the purely ludic. If, then, there are many shades of doubt, there are also a number of different motivations brought

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<sup>3</sup> *Lectures on Russian Literature*, p106.

<sup>4</sup> 'The philosophy of Browning, in *The Essential G.K. Chesterton*, p54.

into play in a sceptical practice of writing: the desire to understand, the desire to subvert, the desire for tranquillity, the desire for intellectual adventure, the desire for mastery, the desire for the other. Scepticism in the novels of Dostoyevsky and Robbe-Grillet bears some resemblance to the game of go described in Robbe-Grillet's *Le miroir qui revient* in that each moves their chosen pawns into the empty spaces which are also the guarantee of their "liberté". It must be remembered, of course, that no-one, neither the writer, nor the critic, can play the game with empty hands.

## Selected bibliography

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The following bibliography is divided into three main sections: I primary, II critical and III theoretical. Both primary and critical texts are divided according to author (i.e. Dostoyevsky or Robbe-Grillet) and critical and theoretical sections are further subdivided into book and article listings. The theoretical section includes both general and specific works in relation to the theme of scepticism that is the 'middle term' between the two novelists.

Of the primary texts by Dostoyevsky only those discussed in the thesis, and belonging to what Chestov has called Dostoyevsky's "second period", are included here with the relevant notebooks. Similarly, Robbe-Grillet's films and *ciné-romans* have been omitted along with his short stories (*Instantanées*, 1962) and three of his novels (*Un régicide*, 1949; *Topologie d'une cité fantôme*, 1976; *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*, 1978). The selection is dictated as much by personal preference as by the representative nature of the texts in question.

Not being a student of Russian I have made principle use of Magarshack's translations of Dostoyevsky (Penguin edition), while the Minuit edition of Robbe-Grillet has been used. Other translations/editions have been consulted and these have been recorded where relevant.

### Primary

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